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Great Lives

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1861....Birth of Douglas Haig.
1885....First Commission in the 7th Hussars.
1896....Staff College.
1898....Soudan Campaign.
1899....Brigade Major, Cavalry Brigade,
Aldershot.
1900....South African Campaign.
1903....Inspector-General of Cavalry in India.
1905....Marriage.
1906....War Office.
1909....Chief of General Staff, India.
1912....G.O.C.-in-C., Aldershot Command.
1914....G.O.C. 1st Corps, B.E.F.
Retreat from Mons.
Battle of the Aisne.
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1916....C.-in-C., B.E.F.
July. Battle of the Somme.
December. Field Marshal.
1917....C.-in-C., B.E.F.
February. Calais Conference.
April. Battle of Arras.
June. Battle of Messines.
July. Battle of Flanders.
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- 1918....C.-in-C., B.E.F.
 March. German Attack – Battle of Amiens.
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 April. Battle of the Lys.
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 August. Battle of Bapaume.
 August. Battle of Arras.
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 October. Second Battle of Le Cateau.
 October. Battle of the Lille.
 October. Battle of the Sambre.
- 1918....*11th November.* The Armistice.
- 1919....C.-in-C., Forces in Great Britain.
 Created Earl Haig, Viscount Dawick, and Baron Haig of Bemersyde.
- 1920....Foundation of Officers' Association and British Legion.
- 1928....Death of Earl Haig.

CHAPTER I

The Haig family – birth, 19th June, 1861 – early school-days – Clifton – Brasenose College, Oxford – Sandhurst, 1883 – a prophecy – 7th Hussars – regimental officer in India – A.D.C. to Inspector-General of Cavalry – Staff College, 1896 – another prophecy.

If the student were to search the recorded lives of the great men of history for an example of a career flowing evenly and irresistibly from its source to its culmination, he would find his task completed in the story of the life of Douglas Haig. From his earliest manhood until the day when, triumphant, he watched his troops defile before him across the bridges of the Rhine, each successive step seemed the inevitable consequence of what had gone before.

Yet it was personal to himself. His ancestry was not such as one would expect to give birth to a great soldier. He could trace a direct, but distant, descent from the Haigs of Bemersyde, a family which from time to time in Scottish history had given men who had played an honourable but undistinguished part in the history of their country, but their record is rather one of patient competence than of leadership.

Even his birthplace, a secluded, dignified square in Edinburgh, was one from which one would anticipate a scholar rather than a soldier.

He was the youngest son of a family of eight, of whom five were boys. His father, John Haig,

was a Fife man, proud of his home and the Kingdom, and with little liking for even such restrained excitement and amusement as the Scottish capital at that time could afford. The educational needs of his family had compelled him to acquire a house in Charlotte Square, in Edinburgh, and there, on the 19th of June, 1861, his youngest son was born. Asthma forced the father to spend much of his time abroad ; he saw little of his youngest son, and his death in 1878 left no final blank in Douglas Haig's life.

The influence of his mother was greater. She devoted her whole life to her children. She heard their prayers night and morning. The deep religious principles which ruled the later years of Douglas Haig's life sprang from her teaching of her youngest son. He cherished her memory. Her picture hung above his bed at Bemersyde in the evening of his life. On her death, a year after her husband's, the home influence was exercised by his elder sister, Henrietta, and between these two there was formed a lifelong and remarkable bond of comradeship and deep affection. She was his trusted confidante and adviser. It was she who eventually directed his steps into the Army when both public school and university had failed to provide him with any definite ambition for a career, and it was in her house that he died. She survived him by only a few weeks.

His early years showed no very decided or outstanding characteristics. A pannier on a pony replaced the conventional perambulator in his

infancy. Promoted from the long-clothes of babyhood, he wore the kilt of his country. His temper showed signs of violence rigidly controlled by the hard discipline of a Scottish family of the period. A crop of bright yellow curls, the joy of his mother, was shorn by unsympathetic elder brothers. Of these childhood days, we carry away a picture of a small golden-headed be-kilted boy secured to the pannier of a pony, and bearing in his hands a drum with the quaint inscription, "Douglas Haig - *sometimes* a good boy."

His first school-days were spent, while still only eight years old, as a weekly boarder in a school at St. Andrews. But, after a few months there, he joined an elder brother at the Edinburgh Collegiate School, boarding in the austere puritanical atmosphere of a presbyterian spinster lady.

His Scottish education finished in the preparatory stage at the Collegiate School. He had been destined for Rugby by his parents. But his mental development had been slow, the standard for Rugby was high, and eventually it was decided to send him to Clifton as a school better suited to his scholarly attainments.

During his four years at Clifton he made no deep mark. Neither his preceptors nor his school-fellows discovered in the boy any indications of the qualities which were to distinguish him in after life. Nor did he himself carry away from Clifton either any abiding personal friendship or any deep respect for public-school life. Later in

life, the school motto, often on his lips, represented one of his deepest convictions – “*Spiritus intus alit*” (the spirit quickeneth).

But however deep his conviction in later life, there is no evidence that Clifton gave him either any deep religious belief or an aspiration towards a life in conformity with the school motto. He passed from Clifton to Brasenose College, Oxford, rather more in accordance with the custom of his class of society than in pursuance of any definite plan for his future life. And at Oxford, as at Clifton, he found no satisfaction. The work there neither interested nor inspired him. His mind was essentially practical. He could devote unstintingly all his efforts towards a clearly defined objective, but the search after knowledge for knowledge's sake made no appeal, and for written examinations as a test of ability he cherished throughout life a profound contempt. Ill health in the summer of 1881 interrupted his studies at Oxford, and deprived him of the residential qualification for a degree within three years. But it weighed no whit with him. He had still no purpose in life. He had distinguished himself at polo, he was a passable shot, he hunted, but without enthusiasm since sport to him was even then but a means to an end, not an end in itself.

He left Oxford little changed in essentials from the golden-headed, be-kilted boy of Edinburgh. The pannier and the pony were replaced by the polo saddle ; the kilt by more carefully groomed, almost dandified, garments. The temper was as

yet very far from being under control ; he was liable to gusts of fierce passion. He was markedly reserved. He was purposeless, and somewhat discontented. He had no permanent home, and was handicapped by means inadequate to the requirements of the life in which he found his amusements. There was at this juncture a real possibility that he might drift purposeless through life. From that he was saved by the influence of his sister, Henrietta. She was a woman of strong, determined character. For some time she had sought, without success, to induce an elder brother, John Haig, to adopt a military career. Now she transferred her efforts to the youngest brother. Douglas Haig, still purposeless, agreed, if with no great enthusiasm. He sat for the Sandhurst examination as a university candidate, and in 1883 he entered Sandhurst as a cadet.

At Sandhurst, for the first time ambition took possession of him. As a university candidate he was both older, and, in spite of his desultory studies, more widely informed than other cadets. In sport he had already in some measure distinguished himself by playing for Oxford in the inter-university polo matches. He was, from the first, prominent among his fellow students at Sandhurst, and he resolved that he would retain the ascendancy. He left Sandhurst first in order of merit, with the Anson Memorial Sword as Senior Under Officer, and with a high athletic record. For the first time in his life he made a favourable impression upon those to whom fell

the task of instructing him. One of the staff, when asked which of the cadets gave greatest promise for the future, recorded the prophecy : " A Scottish lad, Douglas Haig, is top in almost everything – shooting, drill, riding, and sport. He is to go into the Cavalry and before he is finished he will be Chief of the Army."

But the time at Sandhurst had given Haig assets of greater enduring value than the good opinion of those under whom he had worked. His ambition had been fired. He had acquired the habit of systematic study. The exercise of authority as Senior Under Officer had forced him to master his outbursts of passion. He had learned to value and practise strict self-control. But at Sandhurst, as at Clifton and Oxford, he had made no intimate friends. He was envied but not admired. He was not popular. His shyness was mistaken for conceit. The strict discipline he had enforced as Senior Under Officer had given him the semblance of arrogance. The aloneness which had been first formed in his early family and school life had been intensified. He had set, in fact, his own standard for himself without consideration of the opinion of others. Sandhurst had whetted his appetite for success, and when, in due course, he received his commission in the 7th Hussars and joined the regiment in India, he found ample and easy opportunity for distinguishing himself in the usual work of a cavalry officer of the day. The regiment was then the crack team in Indian polo. And Haig took his place at once

in the team. Still rigidly apportioning the day's work, he speedily mastered the minutiae of regimental administration. In his first year he reorganised the regimental canteen system; within three years he was appointed adjutant of his regiment, and simultaneously made his first adventure in authorship – a short and quite common-place brochure on explosives and demolitions, written, at first, solely for regimental use, but published in 1891. He devoted part of each day to the study of French and German. He spent his leave in India in tours round the remote frontiers of Khelat and Baluchistan, and later, when he could obtain leave to Europe, in visits to Germany and France to study the armies of those countries. From one of these trips he wrote an account of his opinions to Sir Evelyn Wood, which so impressed that officer, then in high office, that it led to Haig's first Staff appointment as A.D.C. to the Inspector-General of Cavalry in England. But his ambition, now fully awakened, saw no scope either as A.D.C. or in regimental soldiering. There were at this time only two methods of advancement in the Army – active service or the Staff College. At the moment, Great Britain was enjoying one of the brief interludes of peace from “small wars,” that during the latter half of the nineteenth century succeeded one another with almost the regularity of the monsoon. Perforce, Haig turned his attention to the Staff College, and set himself to the task of success in the competitive entrance examination. He was rejected,

for colour-blindness, at the medical examination, but the good offices of Sir Evelyn Wood and of the Inspector-General of Cavalry, and his record as a regimental officer procured him a nomination. He entered the Staff College in 1896. Then followed two years of concentrated work. The Staff College is to the soldier what the honours course at a university is to the student. It changed the whole trend of Haig's mind. A quick, accurate grasp of the day-to-day problem had singled him out at Sandhurst and in his regiment. His character and concentration had done the rest. But at the Staff College he learned the value of accurate reasoning, and of the study of the past. History exercised its spell. The frank and free intercourse among the students, all men of character and ability above the average, and the severe criticism of the work done by the teaching staff, checked a tendency to be didactic. His outlook broadened. He lost much of his contempt for mere book-learning, and became himself a keen student of written military lore.

He left the Staff College at the age of thirty-five, successful in all that he had yet attempted in the Service, in perfect physical health, his mind well stored, his brain trained, full of confidence, assured of at least an opportunity of proving his value on the Staff. But even so, his prospects of rising high in the Army were not bright. He was still a captain – many of his own age were already far senior to him in the Service. Even while at the Staff College, he had watched many others

passing over his head by brevet promotion obtained in the fighting in the Soudan. He himself had seen no active service, by which alone the accelerated promotion could be secured.

But again, as at Sandhurst, his character and abilities had greatly impressed his instructors. Once more one of them – this time Colonel G. F. R. Henderson, the distinguished military historian – indulged in a prophecy. “There is a man in your batch,” he said of Haig to a fellow-student, “who one of these days will be Commander-in-Chief.”

CHAPTER II

Active service in Soudan – attracts Kitchener's attention – brevet-majority – Brigade Major at Aldershot – beginning of association with John French – South Africa – Boer War – Colesberg Campaign – relief of Kimberley – in command of mobile columns – rewards – defects in Army.

THE opportunity for active service was soon to follow, and it came not by chance or by the exertion of family influence, which at the time governed the majority of the preferments in the Army, but as the direct consequence of Haig's own work and the reputation which he won for himself at the Staff College. Kitchener, about to resume his advance in the Soudan, found himself in need of three junior Staff Officers, and applied for them from the Staff College. Haig, the "best of his batch," was the first to be selected. Within a few months he was in Egypt, at first in command of a squadron, but very soon acting as Staff Officer to the force of Egyptian cavalry. The Soudan campaign was not one that offered Cavalry Staff Officers many prospects of distinguishing themselves. It was essentially a "small war," and depended for its success upon the efforts of the engineer and the administration far more than on the sabre of the cavalryman. A railway driven into the heart of the desert enabled the highly trained and well-armed British and Egyptian force to come to grips with an ill-armed enemy, utterly devoid of all military skill, who

supinely awaited attack in an inadequately fortified encampment. But fortune stood at Haig's elbow. The Egyptian cavalry conducting a reconnaissance in force, much in the manner of the wars of the seventeenth century, unexpectedly was attacked by the Mahdi's followers. It was the first time the Egyptian cavalry had come into action, and for a time a portion of the force was thrown into disorder. There was some chance of it spreading through the whole force. Haig, promptly realising the danger, and acting on his own initiative, brought into action a battery of horse artillery round which the cavalry could rally. It was a trivial incident, important only because it attracted Kitchener's attention to Haig, and brought to him a brevet-majority and a mention in despatches.

A little later, at the end of the brief campaign, he was ordered to Aldershot to take up the appointment of Brigade Major of the Cavalry Brigade, then commanded by General John French, and there commenced the close association between these two men which continued intermittently throughout his career, and terminated only when Haig succeeded French as Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in France.

But his time in Aldershot was short. In South Africa a storm was brewing that was to give Haig a greater opportunity of showing his mettle. Ever since the ignominious ending of the Jameson Raid into the Transvaal in 1896, the relations of the Boers and Britishers in South Africa had been

strained. In September 1899, the arrest of a prominent member of the British community in Johannesburg, the commandeering of a large quantity of rolling stock belonging to the British Cape Colony, and the sequestration of half a million of gold from the Rand brought matters to a crisis. It was a glaring defiance of the British Empire, and it was realised that further negotiations, unless backed by the threat of force, were futile. The British Government forthwith ordered a force of 10,000 troops to South Africa. Among them were the cavalry from Aldershot, with French in command and Haig as his Staff Officer. The reply of the Boer Government to the threat of force was prompt. President Krüger presented an ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of the British troops, and followed it up by a declaration of war.

Although the possibility of war had been long foreseen the actual event found Britain utterly ill-prepared. Neither in the War Office nor in the Cabinet was there any accurate knowledge of the strength of their opponents.

A force of some 60,000 men was ordered from Britain and India, and no one doubted but that this would suffice to subjugate the two small Boer republics. Before twelve months were passed the strength had been doubled, and the end was even then not in sight. Yet the first days of the fighting presaged well for the success of the British arms. At Dundee, in Natal, a small British force inflicted a sharp defeat upon a column of Boers,

and at Elandslaagte, General French – still with Haig as his Staff Officer, and now in command of a mixed force which included his own cavalry – by a forced march brought a still larger body of the Boers to battle, and dealt them an even heavier blow. But for these initial reverses, the Boers exacted sharp retribution when, at Rietfontein, they practically annihilated a British force of 1,200 men, and drove Sir George White, then in command of the British forces, back into Ladysmith, to be ignominiously surrounded and besieged.

French and Haig narrowly escaped sharing the hardships of the siege. They left by the last train that passed out of the beleaguered town.

The British Government, thoroughly aroused, forthwith despatched another large force to South Africa, and Sir Redvers Buller, now in chief command, advanced to attempt the relief of Ladysmith only to suffer severe defeat at Colenso. Almost at the same moment, at Magersfontein and Stormberg, the British suffered further reverses.

Against this gloomy background of errors and defeats, the Colesberg campaign, where French – still with Douglas Haig as his Staff Officer – was in command, stands out in sharp relief.

In the Colesberg area the Boers, seizing the passage across the Orange river at Norvals Pont, had occupied the railway junction, and threatened to penetrate into Cape Colony. The population, mostly Dutch in origin, was either neutral

or hostile to the British. French was given the task of preventing any further advance. By a series of admirably designed and executed small offensive actions, he not only held the Boers in check, but actually cleared the whole area. A little later the whole aspect of the war had changed. Lord Roberts, with Lord Kitchener as his Chief of Staff, had arrived in South Africa, the British force had been nearly doubled, and, by the end of January, the advance, that was to end only with the capture of the capitals of the two Boer republics, was ready to begin.

Once again the cavalry, under French and Haig, was to take prominent part. On the 15th of February, by a long and rapid forced march, it relieved Kimberley – the first blow in Lord Roberts's campaign – and, a few days later, Cronje, one of the most prominent Boer leaders, with a considerable force, was brought to bay, and surrendered at Paardeburg. A month later, Bloemfontein and Pretoria had fallen, and, by September, Lord Roberts informed his Government that "nothing is now left of the Boer Army but a few marauding bands," and returned home, leaving the suppression of the scattered Boers in Lord Kitchener's capable hands.

Throughout all these operations, Haig had continued to serve as Staff Officer to General French, and while to General French as commander must belong the chief credit for the long series of actions which had known no reverse, yet it is not unfair to claim for Haig some share. The

success of such operations depends in large measure upon accurate Staff work, and, throughout, the orders for the force were prepared by Haig, and written in his own handwriting. Carefully preserved, they served as a model of such operation orders at the Staff College for a quarter of a century. And behind the orders there were the same careful regard to every detail, the same strict adherence to method, both in plan and execution, that marked Haig's work throughout his career. French and Haig were, in fact, an ideal combination for the work they had to perform. French, determined in purpose, bold in conception, and prepared to accept all responsibility ; Haig, accurate, clear-headed, a master of Staff work, of unwearied energy, with an almost uncanny capacity for foreseeing the probable action of his enemy.

The departure of Lord Roberts marked the severance of the association of the cavalry leader and his Staff Officer. Soon afterwards, Lord Kitchener selected Haig, now with the local rank of full colonel, for the command of a group of mobile columns, and charged him with the task of dealing, first in the Orange River Colony, and later in Cape Colony, with the small bodies of Boers still waging guerilla warfare. It is interesting to note that the detached parties of Boers, against whom he was operating, were under the chief command of General Smuts, who, in the Great War, was to be a member of the War Cabinet of Great Britain.

Haig fought no notable action, but the area for which he was responsible suffered no set-backs such as were common elsewhere. Until the end of the war, in the last days of May 1902, he retained in this command.

His services in South Africa brought to him a full measure of reward. He was gazetted to the command of a regiment of cavalry ; he received the brevet rank of full colonel. He was made a Commander of the Bath. But these honours did not represent his real gain. He had had experience both as a responsible Staff Officer and in independent command. Always self-confident, his belief in himself was now fortified by success in the harsh trial of war. He had measured himself against others whom he might regard as his rivals in the service, and knew that he did not fail in comparison. At the Staff College he had seen men of his own age far senior to him in the Service ; now, at the age of forty-one, with only seventeen years' service completed, he had already outstripped almost all of his contemporaries. The hardship of the campaign had not affected his health. The rigid lines on which he had regulated his life throughout his manhood had stood him in good stead. Sturdily built, without an ounce of superfluous flesh, his face still unlined, without a grey hair on his head, he had only been changed in personal appearance through the years on the veldt, by a rather sharper setting of the line of his jaw, and a slight deepening of the unflinching eyes.

The war had made him aware of some of the shortcomings of the Service. Although crowned with success, it had been fought in his opinion by haphazard methods. There had been manifold and manifest errors both in strategy and tactics. The various arms had not been properly used. Throughout, there had been the handicap of the lack of an efficient body of trained Staff Officers. The war had exemplified much, but it had shown more clearly what should be avoided than what was to be adopted. He saw before him a definite task, quite apart from his own advancement, to which he could set himself: the rectification of the errors which he had noticed in the Army system, and the perfection, as far as it might be possible for him to accomplish it, of an army so organised and trained as to be able to play its part in any theatre of war and against any foe.

CHAPTER III

In command 17th Lancers at Edinburgh – A.D.C. to H.M. King Edward VII – again with Lord Kitchener, as Inspector-General of Cavalry in India – Staff tours – *Cavalry Studies* – Indian Staff College – marriage – at War Office – association with Haldane – organisation of B.E.F. – organisation of Territorial Army ; of forces overseas.

ACTIVE campaigning on the veldt was followed by a brief year's interlude of comparative ease in command of the 17th Lancers at Edinburgh. Edinburgh, with its small garrison, offered little opportunity for energetic training of troops. The regimental work was a pleasant part-time occupation for a man of Haig's energy, and he needed a period of rest. But Edinburgh always exercised peculiar fascination over him. He welcomed the privacy of a town where soldiers lived apart from the ordinary lives of the inhabitants. His moderate means were no disadvantage in a city where money counted for little. He took no part in the social life of Edinburgh. He resumed his polo, and in due course his regimental team secured the inter-regimental championship. He took up, with characteristic thoroughness, the national game of golf, and acquired some slight proficiency in it. A few peculiarities, that subsequently became more marked, began to display themselves. He lived alone, and aloof even from the regimental mess. If any of his officers participated in any

game or function with him, he insisted that they did so as his guests. He would admit none to even such measure of equality as the sharing of expenses might be considered to involve. A definite part of each day was devoted to reading, but his studies were strictly limited to military subjects.

The year passed swiftly and easily. He had been appointed A.D.C. to the King, and his duties brought him into personal touch with the monarch, and the high opinion which King Edward formed of him was of material service to him in the future.

Meantime, Lord Kitchener had gone from South Africa to India, and had at once projected a vast scheme of reorganisation of the Army in India. The post of Inspector-General of Cavalry fell vacant, and Kitchener, mindful of the impression that Haig had made on him both in Egypt and Africa, made urgent application for his services. There was no lack of opposition to the appointment. Haig was only a senior colonel with less than twenty years service. The appointment was normally held by a major-general. But Kitchener would brook no refusal. In 1903, Haig returned to India, which he had left ten years before as a junior regimental captain, to take up the duties of the head of the cavalry. A year later, not yet forty-three years of age, he was promoted major-general.

The task which he had now to undertake gave him, even more than the small command he had held in South Africa, scope for his abilities.

In the general organisation for war, India had fallen far behind the home land. There was no General Staff, and no Staff College. India still trained her army on her own text-books, with little or no reference to the studies in the art of war that had been carried out in Europe. There was no knowledge of modern European armies either as to their organisation or their method of fighting. A large proportion of British cavalry served for long years in India, and might be recalled to take part in warfare against a highly trained European army. Even the Indian cavalry might well, in Haig's view, be required to serve elsewhere than on the frontiers or on the plains of India. He was resolved to bring the cavalry in India, both British and Indian, up to such a level of training as would fit them to meet any emergency.

He threw himself into the task with all his energy. Within a few months of taking up his duties, he had produced a new manual for the cavalry training. By ruthless and searching inspection of each unit, carried out with little previous notice, he ensured that its maxims were enforced. He organised for the first time in India the system of teaching by Staff tours, each one of them most carefully thought out beforehand, and executed with inspiring enthusiasm. At the end of his term of office, he published the result of these courses, in a volume, *Cavalry Studies*, which at once became a standard text-book. He initiated the "Cavalry School" for the higher training of

officers. Throughout, he taught the doctrine that the cavalry, both British and Indian, must prepare itself for fighting against forces far more formidable than those to be found in India. "The cavalry of India," he said repeatedly, in words prophetic of their accomplishments in Mesopotamia and Palestine in the Great War, "will play a great part in warfare far beyond the frontiers of India." The cavalry responded to his teaching. He was a harsh taskmaster. No fault was allowed to pass unnoticed. Praise was scanty and very rare. But his tireless energy and clear knowledge earned its recognition. The cavalry had boundless faith in their young Inspector-General. He made no secret of his own opinion of the units with which he was dealing : "the junior officers, the captains and subalterns of the Indian cavalry were," he held, "the best in the world ; the majors were an average lot ; most of the commanding officers past their work."

In the higher organisation of the army in India, Haig as Inspector-General of Cavalry, had no direct concern. The war in South Africa had brought into prominence at home the deficiencies of the organisation at the War Office. The labours of the Esher Committee, before which Haig had been called as witness, had initiated far-reaching reform at the War Office, but in India an obsolete and strangely incongruous system of Army control still obtained. The Government of India was autocratic, and in military matters entirely independent of the War Office. The

Viceroy had to assist him a Council roughly analogous to the Cabinet at home. On this Council the Commander-in-Chief had no seat. Military affairs were under the control of a military member of Council – necessarily junior in rank to the Commander-in-Chief – through whom all the Commander-in-Chief's proposals had to be submitted, and who was charged with the duty of criticising, and, in certain cases, summarily rejecting them without even submitting them to the Viceroy. To a Commander-in-Chief of Lord Kitchener's prestige and character such an organisation was intolerable. His efforts to effect an alteration in the system were opposed by Lord Curzon, then Viceroy. The controversy between these two outstanding personalities became acute, and, in the end, had to be referred to the Government in London for decision. Eventually the decision was given in favour of Lord Kitchener's proposals, and Lord Curzon resigned the office of Viceroy.

Before Haig had gone to India, King Edward, who already had recognised his outstanding ability, had directed him to communicate to him privately his views not only on his own immediate task but on any other military matter of outstanding interest, and Haig had complied by a series of letters giving his views in considerable detail. In the Kitchener–Curzon controversy, Haig concurred whole-heartedly with the Commander-in-Chief. When the matter was settled with the complete approval of King Edward, Haig wrote :

"We soldiers certainly owe the King a great debt of gratitude for the important share he has taken in bringing about this salutary change."

Haig's connection with King Edward had a more intimate bearing on his life. During a brief leave in England in 1905, he was invited to Windsor for the Ascot Races, and there he met, on the first day of the races, the Hon. Dorothy Maud Vivian, who was one of Queen Alexandra's Maids of Honour. By the end of the week they were engaged, and within a month the wedding was celebrated in the private chapel at Buckingham Palace – the first time that the chapel had been used for any ceremony not immediately connected with a member of the Royal Family. It is recorded that Haig, when someone risked a comment on the rapidity of the courtship, replied, "Why not! I have often made up my mind on more important problems than that of my own marriage in far less time."

He returned to his post in India for one more year of strenuous work, but it was with an outlook changed by more than his wedding. He had heard at home of the steady increase of Continental armaments. He was, at this period, himself no student of Continental politics, but at home, both in the War Office and elsewhere, he heard the forebodings of others. The possibility of war, however remote, could not be wholly disregarded, and Haig was now impatient to be back in Britain, both to take his share in the preparation of the Army for war, and, if war should occur, to

be assured of active service. His ambition was to be appointed to command a division, but as yet he was too junior in the list of major-generals for such advancement.

In 1906 a change of Government in England brought Mr. Haldane to the War Office, with the definite task of bringing the British Army up to a state of efficiency requisite for her responsibilities both in regard to her own Empire and in view of the ominous developments of European politics. Already the King had been impressing upon Mr. Balfour, the Prime Minister, that Haig should be brought to the War Office, "where his initiative and organising powers are much wanted."¹

Haldane, to use his own words, "after surveying the whole Army, took upon himself to ask for Haig. . . . He seemed to be the most highly equipped thinker in the British Army."

In August 1906, Haig gave up his appointment in India, and a fortnight later assumed control of his new post at the War Office, and there began the partnership between Haldane the Lawyer and Haig the Soldier which revolutionised the organisation both of the British Regular Army and of the Auxiliary forces at home and throughout the Empire.

It would be hard to find two men offering a greater study in contrasts than the civilian and soldier, now thrown together, and for the next few years to work in perfect accord. Haldane,

¹ There had, at one time, even been some talk of giving him the new appointment of Chief of the General Staff, created by Lord Esher's scheme of Army reorganisation.

with features typical of a lawyer : closely compressed lips, shrewd sunken eyes, a large head hanging loosely forward on rounded shoulders, heavy, almost unwieldy in build, slovenly in dress, averse to any form of physical activity ; and Haig, scrupulously neat in his person, clear-cut features, strongly marked line of jaw, a heavy moustache, a compact, sturdy and alert body with broad well-set shoulders. In their mental equipment there was almost as sharp a differentiation. Haldane, a ready speaker, with a most diverse range of knowledge and thought, a lover of art and literature, expert both in dissecting and advancing argument. Haig, distrustful of casuistry, almost inarticulate in expressing his views by word of mouth, though with an exceptional facility for vivid and cogent writing, inadequate in verbal argument, apt to be intolerant of others' views, with few if any interests and little knowledge outside the scope of military matters.

But they had many notable points of contact ; minds that penetrated rapidly to the heart of a problem ; immense power of application ; great tenacity of purpose ; determination to let nothing prevent them reaching their goal.

The War Minister, once the general principles and design of the various measures of reorganisation were settled, was well content to leave the working out of details to the Staff. In Haig's office, in the three years of his tour of duty at the War Office, there were worked out in succession : first, the whole scheme for the organisation of the

British Expeditionary Force in almost the precise form in which it took the field in 1914 ; next, the reorganisation of the second line of defence which made the heterogeneous collection of volunteer units, dotted about the country without any relationship to one another and with no higher military organisation, into an army of fourteen Territorial Divisions, each complete in itself, including all auxiliary units ; and, finally, the arrangements with the great overseas dominions whereby they also adopted the British system of divisional organisation and equipment, so that, should the emergency arise, their forces could take their place alongside the British Army in a great imperial force.

It was an immense task, and so successfully was it accomplished that the schemes devised and perfected by Haig in those strenuous years remained unaltered in essentials until put to the test in 1914, when they formed an integral part of the development of the strength of the Empire.

Yet the work was done both quietly and unobtrusively. There was no attempt to attract fuller attention to himself, or to assert his own personality beyond his own immediate sphere of work. He made no effort to seek the favour of men prominent in the nation's life. With the exception of his own chief, Mr. Haldane, he saw little of the statesmen of the country. He was no clubman. He entertained only those serving immediately under or with him, and the entertainment of these consisted principally of a hasty meal and

then a continuance of discussion of the problems with which they were concerned, in the seclusion of his study. He took no part in public life. When his tour of service at the War Office came to an end, few outside its precincts knew of his work, and his name was probably less well known to the general public than when he left South Africa.

He himself welcomed the termination of his time at the War Office. His health had stood the strain of long office hours almost as successfully as it had all previous strains in the desert, in the veldt, and in the tropics, but he wanted to be in closer contact with troops. He discouraged the suggestion of an extension of his time, and when, in October 1909, there came the offer of the appointment of Chief of the General Staff in India, he joyfully handed over his duties, and turned his face again eastward, feeling assured that if war should eventuate in Europe he would be recalled to bear his part.

CHAPTER IV

Chief of General Staff in India – training of Army – views on
strategical doctrine – employment overseas of Army in India
– Commander-in-Chief at Aldershot – the Curragh incident
– life at Aldershot.

THE India to which he returned was still in the throes of reorganisation. The great scheme of redistribution and reorganisation of the Army launched by Lord Kitchener was far advanced but not yet completed. But Lord Kitchener himself had now finished his term of office, and had handed over charge to his successor, Sir O'Moore Creagh, under whom Haig was to serve as Chief of Staff.

There still remained much to be done to perfect and round off Lord Kitchener's work. Kitchener, with his powerful personality and great driving power, had been able to work by methods impossible to a man of lesser calibre. Haig's first task was to reorganise the Staff methods and system at Headquarters, and make a machine applicable to normal conditions and personalities. To this end he brought to India officers trained by himself at the War Office, to fill vacancies as they arose in responsible Staff appointments, and to bring the obsolete methods of Indian Army Headquarters into line with the War Office in London. This preliminary task accomplished, he was able to devote his whole energies to the more important and congenial task of the training of the Army for war. During Lord Kitchener's term of

office, the higher training of officers and units had necessarily been neglected in favour of the more urgent task of reorganisation and redistribution. Haig now set himself to remedy the deficiency. Pursuing the same plan that he had in mind when he had been Inspector-General of Cavalry, he commenced a series of Staff tours for the training of commanders and senior Staff Officers, culminating in annual manœuvres on as extensive a scale as the limited funds available would admit.

Each of the Staff tours was devoted to some definite phase of modern European warfare, and it is remarkable to observe how in each successive tour Haig foresaw many of the problems with which he himself was to be confronted in the course of the Great War : the extrication of an army from threatened envelopment in the earlier stages of a war ; the change from retreat into an advance and attack ; the long wearing-out battle between well-trained and well-led forces, before the strength of the army could be so lessened as to admit of decisive attack.

In these Staff tours in India, he was using almost the same words which, eight years later, he was to repeat to the Cabinet of the Empire. There could be no short cut to victory. Whatever the strategy, final victory could only come when, after the first clash of battle, the wearing-out fight, of whatsoever character it might be, had exhausted and reduced the enemy's power of resistance and his will to fight.

In his last Staff tour in India, he studied the problem of the possible despatch of a contingent of the Army in India to Europe and its participation in a war against a European force, and in the brief summing up of the work of the tour there occur words which contain the core of his teaching ; and in view of what actually transpired in the Great War they seem strangely prophetic :

No plan of operation can with any safety include more than the first collision with the enemy's force. . . . Plans aiming far beyond the strategical employment and first collision . . . may become harmful if they are allowed to hamper the judgment and impede the initiative. . . .

The German General Staff preaches the doctrine of envelopment, the French General Staff advocates a large general reserve with a view to a concentrated blow at a decisive point of the enemy's battle order . . . critics urge that the British General Staff hesitate to publish and to teach a clear line of action. . . . The critics seem to lose sight of the real nature of war. . . . If we go further, we run the risk of tying ourselves by a doctrine that may not be always applicable, and we gain nothing in return. An army trained to march long distances, to manœuvre quickly, and to fight with the utmost determination, will be a suitable instrument in the hands of a competent commander whether the situation is to be solved by "envelopment" or "penetration."

In 1914 the German effort at envelopment and the French attempt at penetration both failed equally and almost simultaneously. The French turned to efforts at envelopment ; and, later, the Germans attempted penetration in France and Flanders – both again without success. In the end, the long "wearing-out fight" was succeeded, as we shall see, by a series of manœuvres, designed

and executed by Haig himself, which were neither envelopment nor penetration but in some measure had the characteristics of both.

But while he trained the Army in India for a conflict with an Army on a European model, he had not lost sight of other work which might be required of it. At Army Headquarters in Simla he caused schemes to be prepared for the despatch from India of forces of suitable size for minor operations in other theatres of war ; and it was in accordance with these schemes, prepared under Haig's orders in 1910, that the various Indian Expeditionary Forces left India during the early days of the Great War and went to Africa and to the Persian Gulf and to Egypt and to Europe.

The scheme for the despatch of a force to Europe met with interesting and peculiar vicissitudes. At the time, the whole policy of both the Indian and the British Government was based upon the assumption that under no circumstances would the Army in India be required to serve outside the Indian frontiers. The Viceroy went so far as to inform the Commander-in-Chief that in his opinion even the study of foreign Army organisation was unnecessary and dangerous and might prove an incentive to war. When it became known that the General Staff in India were actually at work upon a scheme for sending a force from India to Europe in the event of a European war, orders were promptly issued that not only was all such work to be stopped at once but also that any completed work was to be

destroyed. Fortunately the orders were not complied with fully. Copies were carefully, if privately, preserved, and, reappearing in 1914, enabled the Indian contingent to be transferred smoothly and rapidly to France in time to reinforce the hard-pressed remnants of the British Expeditionary Force in the First Battle of Ypres.

The experience of these three years in India was very valuable to Haig in the preparation for his great task of the future.

Though nominally only the Chief of the Staff, virtually he was Commander-in-Chief, for Sir O'Moore Creagh was well content to be guided by him in all military matters. Haig was able to choose his own subordinates, and he gathered round him a band of enthusiastic helpers, many of whom reappeared on his Staff in France. He learned the art of dealing with other branches of the State service. He acquired a wide and true perspective of the problems of the Empire. Perhaps hardly less valuable was the broadening of his sympathies, and the deepening of his knowledge of human nature. For, hitherto, his life had been within the narrow confines of the military machine. In London, at the War Office, he had led the life of a hermit, rarely mixing with those not immediately concerned with his work. At Simla he was thrown into necessary contact with men equal in status, but outside the Army. Even within the Army he was now directly responsible for the well-being as much as for the efficiency of

the great mass of human beings forming the Army in India. He learnt to utilise sympathetically those with limitations, as well as those of finer mettle. His reserve and shyness took a softer tone. His brusqueness of manner gave place to the dignified courtesy in his dealings with others which later, in France, gained comment from all strangers meeting him for the first time – a courtesy extended equally to the humble and to the great. Occasionally his temper still blazed. Insincerity in any form, lack of effort, the slightest variation from complete straightforwardness, were like sparks to tinder, and would be followed by an explosion of ire. Holding himself perfectly rigid, as if with difficulty restraining himself from physical assault of the culprit, his eyes blazing, he would administer reproof in tone so hard and words so forcible that even the most callous winced. But with those who strove even unsuccessfully he was singularly patient. And once convinced of the value of any man's view he would not only allow but welcome from even junior subordinates almost unlimited freedom of expression of their opinions. He never argued, he had not the dialectic art. "I don't agree with you. I think . . ." then his own view, often in not very coherent sentences, was the beginning and the end of his contribution. Yet the view was never haphazard or specious. Expanded in writing, where he was a master of cogent and coherent phrase, it would be found to be built up logically step by step to the "considered judgment" which

was his ideal of all the products of the human mind.

He had little aptitude at conversation in its lighter forms, though he appreciated it and enjoyed listening, and equally he appreciated, though he rarely perpetrated, humour or wit. Few men made fewer jests. The incongruous and grotesque irritated him – it was as if the unreasonable should, in his view, be utterly extinguished.

But these limitations, though they prevailed in some degree until the end of his life, were either lessened or more concealed during the period he spent in India as Chief of the General Staff.

In the autumn of 1911 a telegram from Lord Haldane offered Haig the command at Aldershot, the highest command in the military hierarchy in Great Britain, and in February of the following year he left India and proceeded to his new appointment. He was deeply gratified, and he had every reason for satisfaction. He was only in his fifty-first year, with barely twenty-seven years' service, and he was selected for the most important active command in the British Army in preferment to many most distinguished soldiers of far longer service. His immediate chiefs in England would be two men under both of whom he had already served, and whose complete confidence he already possessed : Mr. Haldane, the Minister of War, and Sir John French, the new Chief of the General Staff at the War Office. But, most important of all, the command at

Aldershot carried with it high executive command in the field in the event of mobilisation of the British Expeditionary Force. He himself was already convinced that the call would soon come. The portents were ominous, and Haig was not alone in deducing from them the certainty of war. At the War Office, the General Staff were urging upon the civil authorities the urgent need of adequate preparation in the Armed Forces of the Crown, and Lord Roberts was preaching the necessity of universal military service.

Little success crowned their efforts. Preparations required money, and money was not forthcoming. All available funds were required for the vast measures of social reform which the Government of the day were pursuing in full cry ; little could be made available for preparations for a war which the majority of the Cabinet believed to be almost impossible, and which, even if it did come, in their unanimous view, would not involve the British Army.

Haig's advent at Aldershot was not hailed with enthusiasm by the Aldershot Staff. Very few of them had hitherto served under him ; he was known by repute as a harsh and unfeeling taskmaster. The greater part of his service had been abroad, very few knew of his work at the War Office, and Aldershot was jealous and somewhat scornful both of "Hindoos from India" and "pundits" from Whitehall. None the less the Aldershot Staff was an exceedingly capable body of officers, and it was not long before Haig's

personality had asserted itself and whatever misgivings the Staff might at first have entertained had been dispersed.

For Haig himself, the two and a half years at Aldershot that preceded the war were, like the year in Edinburgh after the South African war, a respite from his labours. The work required of him did not demand such strenuous effort as either the War Office or India.

During a large portion of the year, Haig's task was confined to general supervision of the training in the smaller units. The control of an adequate and capable Staff did not require the long office hours to which he had become accustomed both at the War Office and in India. His command, concentrated at his door, did not necessitate the long wearisome journeys of India. The supervision of the training in the field afforded pleasant hours in the saddle, and left him leisure both for private study and relaxation. Golf replaced polo as his principal recreation. He attacked the game with characteristic thoroughness. He took lessons from a professional. Each stroke was studied and matured with all the care of a military problem. He was too old ever to hope to excel, but his game was characteristic. His ball never left the fairway. His play was as consistent if not of as high a standard as that of Colonel Bogey himself. He was determined to win, and was a most difficult opponent to beat.

His family were for the first time living under his own roof. These were happy years, a refreshing

interlude in a laborious life, their even and uneventful tenor broken only by the Curragh incident, which, though not directly affecting his own command, caused him to intervene with characteristic clear-minded action.

While Europe, after the Agadir crisis and the successive Balkan Wars, was ranging herself in two great and opposing armed camps, in Great Britain all attention was concentrated on domestic politics. The Irish Home Rule Bill had passed the House of Commons. The Bill now before Parliament was certain to become law. The opposition of the House of Lords had been forestalled by the passage of the Parliament Act. Ulster, under the leadership of Sir Edward Carson, was arming, and had proclaimed its intention of resistance by force.

At the Curragh the General Officer Commanding in Ireland had put before the officers the problem of their action in the event of Ulster having to be coerced by arms. A large number of the officers had replied that they would prefer to resign their commissions rather than engage in Civil War against the Ulster Unionists; some went further and forthwith submitted their resignations. Leaders of the recalcitrants were summoned to London, to be informed at the War Office that there had been a misunderstanding. There was as yet no intention of using troops from the Curragh against Ulster.

The chief of Haig's own Staff, a distinguished Irishman, and the brother of the chief mover in

the Curragh resignations, gave Haig his first news of the difficulties that had arisen, in a letter tendering his own resignation in anticipation of even the possibility of being ordered to fight against Ulster.

But meantime the trouble had spread beyond the Curragh, and Haig realised the gravity of the situation. If it was intended to use the Army against Ulster, there was a grave risk that it would disintegrate. On the other hand, if the resignation of the officers had been submitted merely to influence further Government policy, then it was a grave breach of military discipline which he would not countenance. He motored forthwith to London to give his views to his old chief, Lord Haldane, no longer Secretary of State for War, but still, as Lord Chancellor, a member of the Cabinet. The first essential was that the Government should make its own policy clear. If there was no intention of coercing Ulster, a public statement to that effect would restore the confidence of the Army. If not, then the position must be faced at once. Two days later, Lord Haldane made a public speech concluding with the statement that "no orders were issued, no orders are likely to be issued, and no orders will be issued for the coercion of Ulster."

The resignations of the officers from the Army were withdrawn, and as far as the Army was concerned the incident was at an end.

It was the spring of 1914, the busiest part of the Aldershot year. Army manoeuvres, the climax of

the annual training, were impending. A new scheme of army mobilisation – the result of three years' concentrated work at the War Office – had just been devised, and was to be examined and tested at Aldershot. None of these tasks were fated to be completed. On the 29th June, 1914, a shot, fired by a young consumptive with, at the best, but a few years to live, killed the heir to the Austrian throne ; and in a few brief weeks Europe was at war.

CHAPTER V

The murder at Serajevo – the Council of War – Haig's view – opening moves of the Great War – in command of 1st Corps – the retreat from Mons – danger of capture by Germans – the advance to the Aisne – doubts as to French action – the battle of the Aisne – the battle of Ypres – the crisis – New Year's Eve, 1914 – in command of 1st Army – the battle of Neuve Chapelle – Festubert – the battle of Loos – the misuse of Reserves – visit from Lord Kitchener – resignation of Sir John French – appointment as Commander-in-Chief British Army in France.

THE news of the murder at Serajevo excited neither horror nor alarm in Great Britain. It was to the public only a dastardly and somewhat silly crime. There was at least nothing to cause it to be regarded as an incident of international importance. In Whitehall its repercussion was not foreseen. Attention was still riveted on the Irish problem, and the immediate danger then threatening the internal peace of the realm. In Berlin its importance was more carefully gauged. Within a week (5th July) the Kaiser was warning the heads of the Army and Navy that while nothing was to be done that might arouse suspicion they were to be prepared for all emergencies. The publication of the Austrian ultimatum to Servia, with its harsh demands, first showed the danger of the situation, and thereafter events succeeded one another with appalling rapidity.

But it was not until the 30th of July that the British Army received orders to put in force the

precautionary measures indicating the immediate possibility of war. On the same day, Austria declared war on Serbia, and Russia, in support of Serbia, ordered the mobilisation of part of the Army, and Germany in turn issued the warning that, unless Russia desisted from her partial mobilisation, she would mobilise the German forces.¹ On the 31st of July both Austria and Russia decreed the full mobilisation of all their armies, and Germany presented an ultimatum to Russia. On the 1st of August, the German ultimatum to Russia expired, and both France and Germany ordered general mobilisation. On the 2nd of August, all hope of localising the struggle was shattered by a demand from Germany to Belgium that German troops should have free and unresisted passage through Belgian territory. The demand was immediately refused, and, at 11 p.m. Greenwich mean time on 4th August, war was declared between Germany and Britain.

The declaration of war found Great Britain without any accepted plan for its furtherance. Even the question whether British troops should leave the British shores was still an open one, requiring Government decision, and the Government had never devoted time to its consideration.

On the day following the declaration of war, Haig was summoned to a Council of War, to assist the Government to a decision. It was a

¹ Actually it appears certain that even before this secret mobilisation had been commenced. — *Official History*.

conference, rather than a Council. The whole of the Cabinet, the leaders of both the Army and the Navy, and distinguished soldiers and sailors no longer in active employment met in conference. Lord Kitchener, then in England on leave from Egypt, attended. It was a meeting of amateurs and experts at war, and perforce followed, in rambling discussion, many side-issues. The immediate questions requiring decision were whether the British Expeditionary Force should proceed forthwith to the theatre of war, and, if so, where it should concentrate. A scheme had been prepared by the General Staff, in conjunction with the French, providing for the participation of the British Expeditionary Force in accordance with the French plan of campaign. But already Germany, by her earlier preliminary steps of mobilisation, threatened to dislocate this plan. There were even graver difficulties for the Conference. The Admiralty would not guarantee complete immunity from invasion by the Germans, and questioned the advisability of the despatch of even the small force of six divisions. And, on the top of all, it was now revealed that, so tardy had been the preparations, it was impossible to equip for immediate service more than four divisions. Round these difficulties the proceedings of the War Council rapidly deteriorated into desultory discussion with which Haig had no patience. He intervened to propound a list of fundamental questions, the replies to which he said must govern the decision. They were :

1. If the British Expeditionary Force do not move at once would the French be decisively beaten?

2. If the British Expeditionary Force (in such strength as could at once be despatched) did move to the concentration area desired by the French and War Office, would its assistance suffice to avert such defeat?

3. Alternatively, if the British Expeditionary Force joined the Belgian Army in a flank position, could the Germans divert from their main attack against the French sufficient troops to overwhelm it, or could the Anglo-Belgians so placed operate actively against the German flank?

His own views were clear-cut. He did not believe that the French Army unaided would make head against the powerful German war machine. He realised the value of the moral support that even the diminutive Expeditionary Force fighting alongside the French would provide, but he foresaw the danger that this force, which, small though it was, was the nucleus of all possible future expansion, might be swept into overwhelming defeat in the first battles. He did not share the view that the war would be brief, and that it would be brought to an end within a few months by economic necessity, whatever the issue in the field. He viewed the Expeditionary Force as, at best, only the advance guard of the forces of the nation in arms which in the end would have to take the field. Suitably placed, and joined to the Belgian Army securing the Channel ports, it might render greater assistance to the French by threatening the German flank, and thus effectively preventing the envelopment which was the essence of German strategy, than by direct

interposition on a part of the French alignment. But above all things it was essential to face facts, and the first broad fact was that within a few days the Armies of France and Germany would be locked in battle. The immediate danger was that, with a nation and Army of such sensitive morale as the French, the issue might be jeopardised by any delay. The only plan that had been prepared was that for close co-operation with the French. Therefore he held that the Expeditionary Force must move in its greatest possible strength at the earliest moment in accordance with that plan and conform to the action of the French in the initial stages of the war.

Ultimately the Council decided to keep two divisions of the British Expeditionary Force at home and to send four divisions and one cavalry division forthwith to France. Minor expeditions in distant theatres were resolved upon, and two divisions were to be brought from India to Egypt, both to protect our communications to the East and to be nearer the decisive theatre.

At the Conference, Haig had expressed his conviction that the war would be a prolonged struggle of years, and not of weeks or of months, but the intervention passed almost unnoticed in the rambling discussions. Immediately after the Conference, however, he accompanied Lord Kitchener to the War Office, and continued to urge upon the new Secretary of State for War the view that a great national Army was essential, and

that it should be based upon the Territorial Force organisation which Haig himself had designed.

Though the decision to move the Expeditionary Force had been taken, valuable time had already been lost. It was not until 13th August that Haig left Aldershot for France, and he departed with his mind ill at ease. The plan of the General Staff, which was now being followed, fixed the area of concentration sixty miles East of Amiens, which, in his view, was much too far advanced. He doubted the competence of the Commander-in-Chief and Staff of the British Expeditionary Force to meet the requirements of modern war. He did not share their confidence as to the result of the first battles. The French plan, projecting operations far ahead of the first clash, offended his conception of the correct strategy. He found, to his concern, that the only maps issued to the troops were those for an advance into Germany. He had forebodings that they would not be required.

Meanwhile the two principal opposing armies on the Western Front were hastening towards the frontier, each seeking to put into force the traditional strategy of their respective training before the other could parry the blow. The French, deploying on a long line from the Swiss frontier to the Sambre, the principal tributary of the Meuse, had massed a great force for an attempt to pierce the German line on both sides of the fortress of Metz ; while the Germans were facing them in a line extending still further northward

towards the Channel, and were moving in great strength through Belgium, with the intention of outflanking and enveloping the French left flank. Each plan had its own peculiar merits.

The four divisions of the British Force, organised in two Army Corps, arrived at their allotted positions on the extreme left of the formed line of the Allied Armies on the 21st of August. Haig, in command of the 1st Corps, was on the right of the British force next the French Armies. Little news of events in other portions of the long-drawn battle-line had reached him, and that little was not inspiring. Liège had fallen to the Germans on the 16th. Two days later the main Belgian Army, only a little larger than the British Expeditionary Force, had withdrawn into the fortress of Antwerp. German troops were pouring into and through Belgium. Further south, Namur still held out, but, on the 21st and 22nd, was being very heavily attacked, and prolonged resistance was not to be anticipated. On the very day that the British Army took up its position in the battle-line, the great French attack, which was to pierce the German centre, was delivered. It made little or no progress. News of its progress came slowly, but by the morning of Sunday the 23rd of August it was known that, even if it had not yet definitely failed, it had assuredly fallen far short of such success as would deter the Germans from the development of their outflanking attack in Belgium. But in the area near the British Army there was little sign of war on that fateful Sabbath

morning. The church bells were calling to morning Mass. The country-folk, early astir, were moving on the roads in their best Sunday clothes, interested and rather stolidly amused at the sight of foreign but friendly soldiery. The troops themselves, glad of a morning's ease after their long marches from the concentration area, were cheerful and in high spirits. To an onlooker it might have seemed the opening of a day on manœuvres in peaceful England. And Haig, as was his wont on manœuvres, himself was in the saddle, passing the early hours among his troops.

In the forenoon he was summoned to a conference with the Commander-in-Chief. Already the scene had begun to change. A little to the northward shells were falling ; the first of the stream of Belgian refugees were already passing wearily southward. The mist of dawn had given place to bright sunshine.

It was not a cheerful conference. The news of the lack of success of the main French attack was confirmed ; and on the immediate front, outwards on the flank, large bodies of the enemy were reported to be moving rapidly onward. But the order of French General Headquarters for an advance on the morrow still stood. Haig was gravely concerned. In the existing strategic circumstances he was convinced that, if the British were committed to attack, they must retain the possibility of breaking off the attack at any moment if required. The country in front was immensely difficult. If the force became

heavily involved it would be an easy matter for the advancing Germans to outflank it and cut off all hope of retreat. The fact that no German attack developed in the forenoon or early afternoon increased his anxiety. It was not in the German interest to alarm the British prematurely. In the late afternoon a small attack did indeed commence, and a portion of the force was heavily shelled, but it was not an attack in force. Night fell with the position still unaltered, and with the British Force under orders to advance on the morrow. But in the middle of the night news came that confirmed all Haig's forebodings. The failure of the great French attack was more definite than had been disclosed ; a great force of Germans was, even then, moving rapidly round the outer flank of the British Army. The French on the right were already in full retreat. The British, if they were to escape complete disaster, must draw back without delay and with all rapidity. It was the commencement of the "manœuvre in retreat" which Haig had foreseen and practised at Aldershot, and his studies now stood him in good stead. Aroused from rest at 2 a.m. there were but two or three hours before dawn, and at dawn the Germans would, almost certainly, attack. The situation demanded quiet decision and prompt action. Haig met it unperturbed. Within half an hour he had issued, in his own handwriting, all necessary executive orders, and was off to supervise their execution. By dawn his army was well on its way, protected by a suitable rearguard.

The Great Retreat from Mons had begun, and by the 1st Corps so well begun that a senior French Staff Officer, whose duty brought him to it during the forenoon, reported to the French General Headquarters that "in the 1st Corps everything was going forward like a peace march."

During the whole war no test of endurance or morale was more severe than these first few days of retreat before an eager and superior enemy.

At first there was whistling and singing in the ranks, but soon that ceased, as the gloom of weariness and disappointment settled on the spirits of the men, and nothing was to be heard but the tread of weary feet and the harsh orders of the officers enforcing march discipline, and the distant sound of guns. Always accompanying the troops trudged the stream of refugees, men, women, and children, weary, pitiful, seeking to save themselves in helpless flight – fear staring from every face.

On the second day of the retreat there occurred an incident which at one time bid fair to bring Haig's career to an abrupt end. The evening of a particularly long and trying day found the rear brigade, with which Haig was moving, close to the Forest of Mormal. The main column in front had been checked, and the rear brigade was close on its heels. The increasing rumble of the guns from the direction of the 2nd Corps' march showed that the enemy were close, but at the moment there were no signs of hostile troops near the 1st Corps.

A river offered a suitable line of defence, and orders were given for a halt until dawn. Every military precaution was taken, the river crossings closely guarded, and the surrounding area patrolled. Late in the evening an attack developed, which for a time looked dangerous. It seemed as if the rearguard was surrounded. For perhaps the only time in the war, Haig was jolted out of his usual imperturbability. "If we are caught," he said, "by God, we'll sell our lives dearly!" and sent a Staff Officer to have a building in the town prepared for a last place of resistance. But the Germans were in less strength than they had at first appeared to be, the attack was beaten off, and at dawn the next day the retreat was resumed.

It was not until the end of the twelfth day of the retreat, on the 4th of September, that the situation definitely improved. On that day there came the news that the Germans had abandoned their attempts at envelopment. Their outflanking troops were moving inwards. The pursuit was at an end. For one more day the retreat continued, then at last came the long-looked-for tidings. The Allied Armies were about to face about and attack their foes. The news spread like wildfire through the ranks, and acted like a charm. Smiles again illuminated the grim features of the men. Once more with their faces towards their enemy, they whistled and sang as they marched. Hope was reborn. With proud satisfaction, Haig reported that the morale of his Corps had

withstood this "greatest trial of all warfare – retreat before a strong and efficiently led army – and was fit and ready to take its place in a great battle." The fact that it emerged from the ordeal with its morale and fighting capacity not only unimpaired but actually enhanced, was due, in large measure, to the skill and leading of its Commander, and to the training for war which it had received from him at Aldershot. As far as was possible to one in his position he had shared the hardships of the men. They had seen him in the saddle from dawn to dark, moving up and down the length of the column, always close at hand when there was any fighting taking place. He had earned the unwavering confidence of both officers and men. No one had seen him flurried or perturbed. He had never allowed discipline to relax. But the men in the ranks knew that he demanded no more of them than he was prepared himself to give.

His Staff had seen him taking by the arm a brigade commander who had suffered under the strain, and walking up and down with him while he reasoned with him like a nurse with a frightened child and restored him to an even mental balance. Already those near him had lost their first feeling of astonishment at hearing their chief, formerly so harsh to failure, dismissing someone who had failed with the kindly words, "You have done your best ; no one can do more."

The next few days were to show a complete transformation in the nature of the operations. The British Army, and the left of the French

Army, by rapid retreat had disengaged themselves from their pursuers. Far away to the south the French Armies were now successfully resisting the attempts of the Germans to advance. The sudden abandonment by the Germans of their plan of envelopment offered, unexpectedly, an opportunity of striking the German right flank under favourable conditions. The French Commander-in-Chief was prompt to seek to turn it to advantage. A General Order issued on the 4th made the necessary preparations, and on the following day an advance to attack the German right flank was ordered. Haig's own directions to his Corps were characteristic. Optimism now ruled both at French and British Headquarters, and was reflected in the orders issued to Haig. The Allied Armies were to sweep forward to the frontier. No opposition was expected. Haig was more cautious. He contented himself with issuing a map showing the best available information of the location of the Armies both friendly and hostile, and the statement, "It is believed that the French are going to take the offensive. The Expeditionary Force is to co-operate." But if the words were chosen with characteristic care and caution, the action was energetic and effective. By dawn his troops were on the move forwards towards the enemy, and he himself, by personal visits to the headquarters of his units, was inspiring them with his own energy and urging them forward. At first it seemed as if the optimism at General Headquarters was to be justified. The

advance of the Corps was almost as rapid as its retreat had been. In seven days the Corps covered seventy miles, fought two important engagements, and captured over 1,000 prisoners. "Such a feat," he recorded, "following upon a prolonged and exhausting retreat, shows that the short-service Regular Army of to-day can bear comparison with the long-service Army of former years." The Germans were retreating in disorder, the roads were littered with abandoned equipment. Haig's own Corps, impelled by his energy, had pushed its way in advance of the general line, and was now acting as the spearhead of the advance. On the 13th of September the Corps reached the south bank of the Aisne ; north of the river the ground offered a strong defensive position. A series of spurs spread like the fingers of a hand from the ridge along which ran the *Chemin-des-Dames*. On the morning of the 14th, the 1st Army Corps moved forward to attack, with a French Corps on its right, and the British 2nd Corps on its left moved forward to attack.

Battle of the Aisne

Instead of the expected German rearguard of tired troops, stern resistance by a fresh German Corps was encountered. The weather was foggy, and the fighting confused. Nevertheless, by the early afternoon the 1st Corps had fought its way forward, and had secured a precarious foothold on a few hundred yards of the ridge, and the Germans could be seen retiring in some disorder.

But on its right and left, the neighbouring Corps had not been so fortunate, and the 1st Corps was now well in front of the general line. There was still some hope that the advantage gained would be confirmed, and that a little more success would bring about a general retirement of the enemy. It seemed to Haig to be one of those fleeting opportunities which decide the fate of battles. In the late afternoon he called upon his Corps for another effort, and once more advanced to a general attack. The troops responded nobly, and when night fell on the exhausted but victorious Corps one brigade had reached and held the *Chemin-des-Dames*. But it was an isolated effort ; on either flank of the Corps the advance of its allies had been stopped. His own attack had not brought about the looked-for general retirement of the Germans. And the Germans, now rapidly strengthening their line with large reinforcements, successfully resisted all further efforts to advance. Gradually the fighting assumed that peculiar form of trench warfare which remained the fundamental feature of the war until its last few weeks.

The battle of the Aisne had been a notable feat of arms for the 1st Corps. A river crossing had been forced in face of opposition. The 1st Corps and its Commander had measured their strength for the first time face to face with the renowned German Army, on relatively equal terms, and were conscious that they had emerged successfully from the test.

As the fighting on the Aisne died down, both the Germans and the Allies sought to outflank their enemy by a series of overlapping movements, and as the battle area gradually extended towards the sea it was decided that the British Army should resume its original position on the extreme flank of the Allies. There were obvious advantages. The lines of communication would be shortened, and the British Armies would be readily available for joint operations with the Navy, should such be required.

Ypres

On the 20th of October the 1st Corps came into line in the Ypres area, with the remainder of the British Expeditionary Force already engaged with the enemy, and then commenced the month of epic struggle known as the first battle of Ypres. It began as an encounter battle ; for both German and French Higher Commands believed that they had now found their adversaries' flank and simultaneously ordered their Armies to attack. The actual orders that Haig received on the 20th were for a long advance march, and he was informed that he need not anticipate much resistance. Haig, still sceptical of the reliability of the information, moved forward with extreme caution. He ordered an advance in short, methodical, well-defined steps ; the ground gained at each step was to be made good by rapid field entrenchment before the next step was undertaken. His caution was justified. By the

afternoon of the 20th his Army was locked in battle with a German force advancing under orders almost precisely similar to those which he himself had received. A week of confused fighting followed, the British still striving to press forward but with their numbers daily reduced by casualties that could not be replaced, hopelessly outnumbered in artillery, and with the scantiest allowance of ammunition for the few available guns. Then came the first great crisis of the long-drawn battle. From British General Headquarters, strangely inappreciative of the actual situation at the front, there came, on the evening of the 28th of October, orders for the British to renew their attack on the Germans. But meantime the Germans had been steadily increasing their forces in the area, and now felt themselves strong enough to sweep aside the despised British Army. Night fell on the 28th with the small British force, which now consisted of six and a half divisions, facing a force of fifteen and a half German divisions, each side preparing to attack the other on the morrow. In heavy artillery the preponderance was even more marked, for the Germans had now massed 250 heavy guns, and to meet them the British had at their disposal only 26 heavy guns. For three days the battle raged fiercely. At dawn on the 29th the storm broke. Under a hurricane of artillery fire the Germans, in dense masses, attacked. Each evening found the British line bent in places but still unbroken, its ranks sadly thinned by heavy casualties,

formations inextricably mixed. Each night was spent in restoring and strengthening the battered entrenchments of the position held by the troops, in disentangling and reforming units, and, wherever possible, in active reconnaissance of the enemy's position.

31st October

On the 31st the crisis reached its culmination. Once more dawn was heralded by the re-opening of the German bombardment; the few British guns followed almost immediately, making what reply they could. Once more the British troops, haggard and unshaven, plastered in mud, and clothed in ragged khaki, but indomitable in spirit, manned their trenches. Almost immediately the Germans, in dense masses, advanced to the assault. Due east of Ypres, on the Menin Road, there stood just behind the British line the hamlet of Gheluvelt. Against it the full weight of the German attack fell. By noon, news reached Haig that Gheluvelt had fallen, and that a local counter-attack, immediately organised, had failed to recapture it. A little later came the tidings that the whole British line was crumbling, and the veteran 1st Division itself was falling back rapidly and in disorder. It was the gravest situation that a Commander in the field has to face. Even allowing for some exaggeration in the news that had reached him, there seemed little hope of saving the issue. His last reserves were expended. He could hope for no reinforcements. He had no

reason to expect any remission in the German effort, for an enemy order, captured the previous day, had shown the importance that the Germans attached to the battle.

"The break through will be of decisive importance. . . . We must and will conquer, settle the centuries-long struggle, end the war, and strike the decisive blow against our most detested enemy. We will finish with the British. . . ."

Haig had only one last pawn to bring into the fight – the influence of his own personality on his troops. A few last rapid orders despatched Staff Officers to apprise G.H.Q. of the situation, and others to prepare a position immediately in front of the town of Ypres to which the Army should rally. The grooms and personal servants of H.Q., hastily assembled, were sent forward into the fighting line. Then, with his personal staff and escort, Haig rode slowly up the Menin Road towards the front, his face immobile, saying no word, but by his presence and calm restoring strength to the exhausted troops.

Misfortune had not even then plumbed its full depth. A little later the Commanders of the two original divisions of the 1st Corps, which had been with Haig since mobilisation, had met to confer, and had been caught in a sudden burst of artillery fire. Both had been wounded – one mortally – five of their Staff Officers had been killed outright. The whole chain of command seemed irretrievably broken.

Then, just when all seemed lost, there came,

dramatically, relief of the tension. A Staff Officer galloped back from the front with the glad tidings that the veteran 1st Division had rallied, a counter-attack under one of the brigadiers had retaken Gheluvelt, the whole line was re-established. The crisis was over.

Haig, his features as immobile in the minute of relief as in the hours of intense anxiety, took instant action. An hour's daylight still remained before darkness would bring a cessation of the fighting. It must not be wasted. Officers were sent with the news to the Commander-in-Chief, orders given for the re-formation of reserves, then Haig went forward himself to ensure that the reorganisation of the divisions did not suffer by the catastrophe to their Commanders and staff.

His trained judgment told him that there would be no renewal of the German attack on his own front. His knowledge of Foch, who was in command of all the troops, British and French, in the area, led him to anticipate that he would order attack at other portions of the line on the Germans for the morrow. Exhausted though his troops were, Haig was determined to participate. At 7 p.m. he issued his orders for the night. The troops were to entrench the position where they stood during the night, and in the morning were to be prepared to resume the offensive in co-operation with any attack their Allies might make on the Germans. But though, true to Haig's anticipation, Foch ordered the anticipated attack, it did not develop.

11th November

There followed a lull in the fighting, to be succeeded by the last and fiercest of the German attacks. But in the interval the British position had been greatly strengthened. Strong points, into which or round which the troops could rally if they were driven from their trenches, had been constructed a little to the rear of the front line. The trenches themselves had made more effective defence against artillery fire ; and though, on the 11th of November, a dense morning mist covered the advance of the Germans no serious success rewarded their effort. Yet the fighting was fierce. It was the final effort of the Germans, and for it they had massed more than double the British strength. They had picked their best troops for the attack, and it was pressed with all vigour. But it was faced by troops as determined as themselves. In one or two places where the Germans succeeded in penetrating the British front line, counter-attacks, promptly delivered, drove them speedily back. By evening the attack had been utterly defeated. The First Battle of Ypres was over, and what was probably the last chance the Germans had of winning the war was gone. Thereafter they could only hope by victories in the field to stave off their own defeat, even to obtain a compromised peace.

The fighting died down. For a few days longer the war-worn Corps remained in the trenches it had so gallantly defended, and then it was

withdrawn to the rest it had so richly earned. Haig himself was forthwith summoned to London for consultation with the War Office. The tactical handling of the British in the battle of Ypres had fallen almost entirely on his shoulders. The success which he had achieved had greatly enhanced his reputation. It was realised that a leader had arisen. Already there began rumours of his succession to the Command-in-Chief if the war continued.

At the request of the War Office he prepared the scheme which was subsequently adopted for the reorganisation of the troops in the field, and the absorption of the new units, some of which were already near the end of their training.

At the time there was a wave of optimism, both at home and in French and British General Headquarters. The Press and the politicians were openly expressing the view that a struggle so fierce could not endure. Haig himself did not share the current optimism. The great German effort had been rebuffed, a victory had been won, but the vast power of the German Empire was still unbroken. A long period of war with all its vicissitudes must still be anticipated. Towards the end of the year the British Army in France, now greatly increased, was reorganised into groups and army corps, and Haig was given the command of the 1st Army, comprising three army corps. To his new Staff, on New Year's Eve, he sounded the keynote of his own conduct: "We can but

hope and go forward to meet what the future may hold with faith and without fear."

The year 1915 was to require the fullest exercise of faith by those who believed in the final success of the British cause. It was a year of small accomplishment and wasted endeavour, and the cause was to be traced not to the battlefield but to the Council chamber in Whitehall. The authority of Lord Kitchener, the War Minister, which had at first been predominant in the Cabinet, had now weakened. Cabinet meetings degenerated into interminable debates on alternative strategic plans.

From such divided counsels decisions are difficult to obtain, and when obtained rarely follow any coherent general plan, and so 1915 saw the British strength dissipated in a series of efforts, all unsuccessful, in distant theatres. Nor were things much better in Paris than in London. There, also, political interference was making itself felt.

There is a striking analogy between the early years of the struggle against Napoleonic power and that of the period of the Great War. The Walcheren and the West Indies Expeditions found their parallel in the Dardanelles and Salonika. In each, resources were squandered and lives sacrificed in fruitless attempts to seek success away from the main theatre, and in the main theatre on the Western Front in 1915 the brunt of the fighting was borne by the French, the British playing but a subsidiary rôle. But Haig with his 1st Army had

his full share of such fighting as fell to the British lot.

In the early months of the year the Germans had withdrawn from the French front a considerable force for an offensive against Russia. The French Commander-in-Chief decided to take advantage of the weakening of the German line by a general attack, and Haig's Army was ordered to participate by an attack which was to have the limited objective of freeing his Army from the low-lying country in which the troops stood knee-deep in water-logged trenches.

Neuve Chapelle, March 1915

There ensued, in March 1915, the battle of Neuve Chapelle. It was Haig's first experience of controlling an attack as an Army Commander rather than directing it at close quarters in command of a Corps. The first day's fighting, carefully planned to the last detail, and using for the first time in the war the artillery barrage to help the infantry, was strikingly successful in attaining the objective with little loss. But thereafter the attack failed to make progress. There was not yet sufficient British strength in France to carry an attack onward to its full development. But although the battle did not achieve full success, yet it accomplished much, advancing the British line for a considerable distance over a broad front. And it had other and more far-reaching results than the mere gain of the ground. Attention was focused on the 1st Army. The British had

proved that they were as formidable in attack as they had already shown themselves to be in defence. The French High Command paid Haig the compliment of sending officers from all parts of their line to study the methods of the 1st Army ; and from Berlin there filtered through the news that the German Emperor had stated that the British 1st Corps under Haig was the best in the world. Most important of all, perhaps, in its ultimate effect, the report of the success achieved brought from England a constant succession of Cabinet Ministers and those in authority seeking first-hand information about the 1st Army and its commander, and giving Haig the opportunity of bringing his influence to bear upon those who were responsible for the conduct of affairs in England.

His views were sought on such diverse subjects as the advisability of sending the whole British Army to the Dardanelles, the abandonment of the Channel ports, the prospect of an Allied success in Italy, a landing in Syria, and the transfer of troops to the Baltic. It was one of the most deeply rooted of Haig's principles never to interfere with the prerogatives of others ; and, while never concealing his own views, he was always particular to urge that those responsible should consult their technical advisers and rely on them. To this he almost invariably added the much needed injunction that firm hold be kept of first principles, and that a plan, when once it had been accepted, must be adhered to and pursued with

determination. Indecision and vacillation, he told the Cabinet Ministers, were more likely than anything else to bring disaster. An opportune visit from Lord Kitchener gave an occasion for Haig to urge upon the War Minister the vital necessity of conscription. He showed how it was now possible to calculate, with almost mathematical precision, the depth to which an attack with any given number of men, properly directed and supported by sufficient artillery, would penetrate the strongly held defensive lines of the Western theatre. He gave it as his definite opinion that for a break on a 25-mile front not less than 36 divisions of 1,100 guns would be necessary. It was this calculation, slightly altered to meet varying circumstances, that he applied in the preparation of all his subsequent attacks. The supply of sufficient men and ammunition for a British attack of this nature could still only be a far-distant goal. Conscription might bring the men to the Colours. Their training would require many months. And the munition problem would take even longer to solve. At home a wave of pessimism, as unreasonable as the optimism it replaced, had swept over the politicians and permeated even to the public. The shortage in ammunition, actually attributable directly to the economy policy of successive Governments in pre-war days, was now laid at the door of the War Office. A Munitions Committee, the forerunner of the Munitions Departments, had been formed to control and expedite the supply, but, whatever improvement

might be effected, the results could not be evident in the field for a year. Kitchener was inclined to let the problem of conscription await upon that of ammunition. Haig disagreed completely. The French Army had already reached the limit of its expansion. The German victories against the Russians would enable them to concentrate more and more effort on the Western Front. The British Army must be ready to take up an ever-increasing share of the fighting in France and Flanders. That was the prime essential, and, if an adequate supply of men was to be raised, conscription was needed. Haig never varied in the view that, whatever vicissitudes the war might bring, the final decision of it would come as the result of the fighting in the main Western theatre, and he was now greatly relieved by Lord Kitchener's definite assurance that he held the same view.

Meantime preparations were on foot for another great French attack ; again the British were to co-operate, and again the British battle was to be fought by the 1st Army under Haig.

The date fixed for the attack was the 25th of September, 1915.

The Battle of Loos, 25th September, 1915

The battle of Loos, by which name the British share in this great offensive is now known, was a battle of great initial success and then of missed opportunity. As in all Haig's battles, he sought to obtain surprise, the prime military factor of success, by the introduction of some novel method in

its first moments. At Neuve Chapelle he had used the barrage, now he made use of cloud gas. There was every reason to believe that the Germans, although they themselves had introduced the new method of destruction a few months before, had no knowledge we were about to follow their example, and that they would be caught unprepared. Nor were those hopes disappointed. Under cover of the gas cloud the British troops swept over the German defences and reached, with little loss, their first objective on almost the whole extent of the line. Then came the crisis of the battle. The first impetus of the attack was dying down. German resistance was stiffening, and German reinforcements were being hurried to the weakened line. With fresh troops thrown promptly into the battle, the wave of attack could be carried onward before the Germans could reorganise. In anticipation of just such a crisis Haig had urged on the Commander-in-Chief that the reserves should be placed at his own disposal, or at least brought so far forward as to be readily available. Both requests had been refused. In bitter impatience, he now saw the precious minutes passing, night drawing on and the reserve divisions still far distant, struggling forward through the congested battle area. The afternoon wore on ; already from the front line there came ominous reports of an impending German counter-attack, and the heads of the reserve divisions were only now arriving. All hope of renewing the attack that day had to be abandoned. The

fleeting opportunity that recurs in war of turning success into victory was gone. The reserve divisions, young raw troops which had never before been in action, exhausted by the long and weary march of the previous day, were in no state to meet the stress and strain of battle. Coming for the first time under fierce fire, and subjected to a well-directed counter-attack, they broke and were driven back. The veteran Guards units, thrown into the battle, restored the situation, but all hope of a great victory had disappeared, and Haig had to content himself with the knowledge that his Army had thrown forward its line over a wide area, had captured several thousand prisoners, and had achieved a greater measure of success than any other portion of the whole allied attack.

He made no secret of his disappointment to obtain complete success, or of the cause to which, in his judgment, the failure was due.

"If there had been," he said, "even one division in reserve close up, we could have walked right through. General Headquarters refuse to recognise the teaching of the war as regards the control of reserves." A sharp discussion ensued between Haig and Sir John French, the Commander-in-Chief. In due course the divergence of view came under the consideration of Lord Kitchener and the Cabinet. Already at home the opinion had been growing that a change in the high command in France would be of advantage. The story of Loos brought matters to a head, and,

by the beginning of December, Haig was informed of the intention of the Government. On the 17th of December he took over from Sir John French the appointment of Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in France.

CHAPTER VI

Lord Kitchener's instructions to Haig as Commander-in-Chief
– Haig's analysis of the situation – meeting with Joffre – a
comparison of the two leaders – Allied plan for 1916 –
Verdun – the battle of the Somme – the introduction of
tanks – criticism of the battle – Haig at the end of the year.

THE scope both of the duties and of the problems of his new appointment were defined by the instructions of the Government conveyed to him by Lord Kitchener: "To support and co-operate with the French and Belgian Armies . . . in driving the German armies from French and Belgian territory and eventually to restore the neutrality of Belgium. . . . The defeat of the enemy by the combined Allied Armies must always be the primary object. . . . I wish you to understand that your command is an independent one and that you will in no case come under the orders of any Allied General further than the necessary co-operation with our Allies above referred to," and then the reassuring promise of "the whole-hearted and unswerving support of the Government, of myself and your compatriots."

Although by these instructions Haig had no immediate concern with the relative merits of the alternative theatres of war in which Britain's vital strength might be utilised, he made no secret of his views. He was a convinced Westerner. "Defeat of Bulgarians and Turks in Mesopotamia,

on the Egyptian Frontier, and in Greece, cannot seriously shake Germany's position or even her influence over the Allies so long as she shows herself able to hold her own on the main front. If Germany wins in the end, her Allies win with her ; if Germany is beaten they are lost."

It was on the Western Front and the Western Front alone that Germany could be beaten. On the Western Front there was, in Haig's view, urgent need of every available British man and gun. The French, exhausted by their great efforts of 1914 and 1915 while Britain was developing her new armies, had already passed the zenith of their man power. Already from Russia there were coming ominous warnings. If Russia, overwhelmed, were to fall out of the war before British resources were developed, Germany might be enabled to concentrate overwhelming forces against France.

There was only one means of effectively assisting Russia, and that was by active operations on the Western Front. The year upon which they were about to enter would be fraught with vital issues. Success might bring victory ; failure would bring inevitable defeat. Lord Kitchener was even more emphatic in his view than Haig. "... Unless we can impose a peace by force of arms in 1916, we shall run a terrible risk of a stalemate peace which will necessitate another war in ten year's time."

For the first time Haig now came into close contact with General Joffre, who had commanded

the French Armies from the commencement of the war and was at this juncture in the full height of his prestige ; and in Joffre, Haig found a man after his own heart. Outwardly the two men were the antithesis one of the other – Joffre, stout to the point of obesity, with heavy, kindly features, slow of bodily movement, careless in dress, his rather florid face surmounted by grey, almost white, hair ; Haig, still lithe, active, and firmly knit, immaculately dressed, and with clean-cut, cold, and impassive features, as yet hardly a grey hair, alert and decisive in his gestures as in his mind. In their dealings with other men, equally marked contrast was apparent – Joffre, affable but very guarded in his speech, which was broken only occasionally by a torrent of words when deeply roused ; Haig, cold in demeanour, candid almost to a fault in the expression of his views, but sparing of words. Yet they had much in common. They shared the faculty of calm, even judgment of hard facts unaffected by impressions of incidents ; they shared an inflexibility of purpose once their decision was made ; they were alike in their imperturbability, neither depressed by lack of success nor unduly elated when success in large measure was attained. Both were pre-eminently sane in their judgment and efficient in their methods.

The immediate practical outcome of their first meeting was the adoption of a general plan for the operations of the year – a co-ordinated and nearly simultaneous attack towards the heart

of the German strength by all the Allies – Russian, French, British, and Belgian – together with an attack by Italy on the enemy immediately opposed to her. To this end, only the minimum forces were to be employed in minor theatres; Gallipoli was already being evacuated, and Salonika was to be held by a small mixed force.

On the Western Front, the plan embodied a series of preparatory attacks in the spring, mainly by the Allies of France, to be succeeded by a decisive blow by the French with every available unit. The British part in the plan was to be a preparatory attack with from fifteen to eighteen divisions in the early spring, to be followed by another immediately preceding and in close co-operation with the main French attack in the general area of the Somme.

The plan thus broadly conceived remained the basis of the fighting of 1916, but it was not destined to be put into operation without interruption.

In Germany there had been a change¹ in the Supreme Command, and with it a change in strategy. Already, with a numerical inferiority on the Franco-Belgian front and conscious that the British power would steadily if slowly expand and accentuate the disparity, the Germans had sought to redress the balance by securing fresh allies in the Balkans and by making the Allies detach their forces from the main theatre. By the early months of 1916 this German plan had

¹ Falkenhayn had succeeded Moltke.

met with considerable success. Servia had been utterly crushed ; Bulgaria had thrown in her lot with Germany. More important still, the Allies had been induced to detach no less than ten divisions from the main Western Front, on which alone the Germans believed the decision in the war would be attained. Heartened by their success, and in the belief that the strength of France had declined almost to breaking-point, the Germans resolved to abandon the defensive strategy on the Western Front which they had followed in 1915, and to assume the offensive in the hope of bleeding France to death before the British power could fully develop. They selected Verdun as the point of attack, and, attacking in great strength, came near to complete success.

By the middle of March the position was critical in the extreme. It was well for the Allied cause that the control of the operations rested with men of such clearness of view and tenacity of purpose as Joffre and Haig. The French at Verdun were strained almost to breaking-point. The temptation to seek relief by an attack with the whole available British force elsewhere was great. It would have involved the abandonment of the pre-arranged plan for the year, and, with it, of all hope of anything more than merely negative results for 1916. On the other hand, if the French could withstand, at whatsoever sacrifice, the German onslaught at Verdun, the battle there was in fact doing precisely what the Allied plan had been designed to accomplish. The Germans

were wearing down the power of their own troops and creating a situation highly favourable to the main Allied attack later in the year.

Haig pressed this view upon Joffre, with whom the final decision rested. The British strength was growing steadily, the German strength as steadily was being expended. He told Joffre that he was now prepared to assume the greater portion of the burden of the autumn offensive. His view prevailed.

In due course the Verdun attack was stayed, and, by July 1916, Haig, his Army intact, highly trained, and complete in every respect except in regard to its full complement of guns and ammunition, was ready to take up the burden of the fighting and deliver the main counter-stroke against the Germans.

The Battle of the Somme, 1st July, 1916

None the less, the situation at the commencement of the battle of the Somme differed greatly from that which had been envisaged when its plan was first conceived. The original purpose of the great joint offensive had been for a decisive breakthrough of the German battle-line. For that attack Haig had estimated that he would require to employ 400,000 men, and must calculate upon casualties of half that number within two months, and the French were to have provided an even greater force. All this was now altered. The available British force had been lessened by the necessity of taking over an extension of the

defensive front from the French, and the French available force was now much less than the British. The piercing of the enemy's line by assault was now no longer the objective. Its main purpose now became :

1. To relieve the pressure on the French.
2. To prevent the Germans transferring their troops to the Eastern theatre.
3. To wear down the German offensive and defensive power.

It was the adoption of Haig's view of the correct strategy, as opposed to the French aim, which, during both 1914 and 1915, had been for a decisive break through the enemy's line.

In consequence, the plan of the intended operations took the form of a methodical advance. Each successive position gained was to be made good, and continuous pressure exerted on the German line. In broad outline, the advance was to aim at pressing back the German lines on both banks of the River Somme and then turning outwards to force the withdrawal of further stretches of the German defences. A continuous, severe, and prolonged struggle was anticipated and prepared for.

For the first effort Haig relied in the main upon strategic surprise. The actual strength of the Germans opposing him was accurately known. Time would be required before reinforcements could reach the enemy. A large proportion of the troops holding the German line had already

been through the maelstrom of Verdun and were still exhausted by their effort there. The British Army was fresh, highly trained, and with its morale high. Yet the German resistance was stubborn, and progress slow and costly. There were four days of intense fighting before the British gained possession of the German front line entrenchments on a breadth of six miles and to a depth of one mile, and ahead of them lay the less strong but still formidable second line of the German defences. A pause in the fighting followed, while Haig made his preparations for a further advance. Once more he sought for some novel measure to assist his troops, and this time he adopted the bold expedient of a night operation. On the night of the 13th of July the British moved forward in the open, in the darkness, to within a few hundred yards of the hostile trenches ; at dawn they swept over the foremost German lines ; and in two more days nearly four miles of the crest line of the ridge dominating the battlefield was in British hands. The first aim of the battle was already clearly accomplished. The German offensive in other areas was stopped. Conscious of the severity of the threat now directed against a vital portion of their line, the Germans were hurrying reinforcements to the Somme, to hold and if possible to drive back the formidable British attack. The wearing-out battle, so long foreseen by Haig as the essential to a situation where decision could be obtained, had commenced. For two more months there followed

what he himself called in his despatches "the real trial of strength between the opposing forces." It was a titanic struggle – a succession of local attacks followed by equally fierce counter-attacks. Each side was fully conscious of the importance of the issue. If the British were driven back defeated, the whole initiative would again pass to the Germans. They would be free to attack where they would, and, with the French exhausted at Verdun and the British unsuccessful on the Somme, and the Russians crumbling in the East, victory in the land war would be within their grasp. On the other hand, if the British attack drove the Germans out of their last line of defences on the Somme – and the threat was imminent and severe – the whole German line in France and Belgium would have to bend back, and all hope of final victory would be gone. In the two months' struggle the balance weighed down steadily in favour of the British. Slowly but surely the attack forced its way forward. By the middle of September practically the whole of the crest line was in British hands, and on the 16th of September Haig was able to deliver another great attack on the Germans. Once again he sought for some new feature to aid the effort, and this time it was ready to his hand. From the earliest moment of the war the immense defensive power of well-directed rifle and machine-gun fire from entrenched positions had called to many minds the advantage that would be derived from some mobile armoured vehicle capable of crossing

the ordinary obstacles of a modern battlefield. The need had brought about the invention of the tank. Extensive experiments had been made, and now for the first time a small number were available. Imperfect though those first tanks were, ill ventilated, defective in their method of steering, they gave formidable assistance as much by their moral as by their material effects, and once more the British made a deep inroad on the German lines.

By the end of September final success seemed assured. The resistance of the enemy had noticeably weakened ; the morale of our own troops, in spite of heavy casualties, was very high. There would, under normal circumstances, be still one month available for further effort before weather conditions would force a halt on active operations, and in that month much should be accomplished. It was not to be. Early in October the weather broke. Continuous rain turned the shell-torn area into a morass of mud ; even the roads, cut by incessant artillery-fire and worn with traffic, became almost impassable. The battle of the Somme was at an end.

The battle, the first of the great battles which Haig conducted as Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, aroused fierce criticism at the time, and has not been free from adverse comment in later years. Measured in terms of the ground gained, and by a comparison of the casualties on both sides, it was regarded in the early months of 1917 as too costly. There had been important

political changes at home. Lord Kitchener's¹ place as Secretary of State had been filled by a civilian, and there was no longer any expert military member of the Cabinet. The Cabinet itself had been reconstituted, and criticism was clamant. Haig himself had no doubts. The losses, heavy though they had been, were more than counter-balanced by the effects which the fighting would have on future operations. It was another and a necessary stage accomplished in the long road that led to final victory. He had gone far nearer a break-through of the German line than he himself had anticipated when the battle opened. He had proved the superiority of the new British Armies against the German veterans. He was completely confident as to the future. The memoirs of the German leaders, published since the war, have fully justified his view.

He was criticised at the time, and since, for using the small number of tanks then available, and thereby sacrificing the advantage of surprise instead of awaiting a moment when a far greater number could have been collected and used with decisive effect. But he had not acted without careful thought. The secret of the tanks had already leaked out. He had certain information that the enemy were aware of their existence, and might be perfecting counter-measures. More important still, no experiments or practice in secret could replace the experience to be gained by actual utilisation in war, and in actual fact the

¹ Drowned on the *Hampshire* in June 1916.

small number used on the Somme had disclosed vital defects necessitating essential modifications in design.

On Haig himself the five months' battle had left its mark. His self-reliance always had been intensified by the exercise of supreme command. His co-operation with General Joffre had been as close and cordial as that between any two leaders of allied armies in history. But he had never sought to overstep the line demarcating the limits of his own power or to infringe on the prerogatives of the French Commander-in-Chief. There had been occasions when their views diverged. Haig, always tenacious of his opinion and adamant when anything which he considered vital was at stake, had firmly established his claim to independence in matters affecting the British Army, and the soundness of his judgment had been vindicated by events.

His mind and body had well withstood the strain. His sympathies had broadened. There was a noticeable lessening of the brusqueness that still sometimes marked his dealings with subordinates. His conviction that he was the man destined to lead the British Armies to final victory had strengthened, and enabled him to disregard, with tolerant amusement, the weakening of his prestige with the new Cabinet. His belief that he was the chosen instrument of a Higher Power for a great purpose, and, perhaps, the necessity for some alleviation of the strain of isolation inseparable from the position of a Supreme Commander

in the field, developed the deep underlying religious bent of his mind. Into the rigid timetable by which he ordered his days he now inserted regular attendance at divine worship. With a few selected members of his Staff he lived in a château a short distance from his headquarters. He was not an early riser. Punctually at 8.25 each morning his bedroom door opened and he walked into the garden, stopping, invariably, to tap a barometer that stood in the hall. A brief walk for a few minutes in the garden preceded breakfast, begun with exact punctuality at 8.30. At nine he was in the large room that served as his study ; a great map on which each unit, both of his own army and the enemy, was marked, covered one wall ; in the centre stood a large writing-table, on which, in the morning, there was hardly even a paper, for each day's work was cleared off over-night ; and in one corner there was a high desk at which he would write standing up. His first task was to receive the reports of the night. Then followed a series of interviews with the heads of the various branches of the Staff and with such subordinate Commanders as he might have summoned to his headquarters. At one o'clock came lunch, never lasting for more than half an hour. Immediately afterwards he left either by car or on horseback to visit one or other of his units. If the visit was to a distant unit, he would have his charger and mounted escort meet him some distance from his headquarters, so that he could have the exercise he

required. Almost invariably he would dismount a few miles from home and finish his journey on foot. Then followed a bath, a short spell of physical exercises, and then two hours' work at his desk. At eight o'clock he dined ; by nine he was again at his desk, and worked until eleven. As eleven struck, he rang for his private secretary, to greet him with the almost invariable formula, " Not in bed yet ? " By 11.30 he was asleep.

There were only very rare occasions when the clockwork regularity of the routine on weekdays was interrupted. But on the Sabbath, in a little wooden hut on the ramparts of Montreuil where his headquarters were situated, the Commander-in-Chief, with one or two of his Staff, never failed to appear in time for the simple Presbyterian service of the Scottish Church. There were few worshippers, and none so attentive as the Chief. And on most Sundays, following the old Scottish custom, he would make notes of the sermon which he had heard and add his comments. From the moment that he left his château for the service until he returned to it, he would allow no word to be said in his hearing about military operations. It was as if he sought for those few brief moments to forget the burden that he bore, and to absorb strength for the ensuing week.

CHAPTER VII

Repercussions of the battle of the Somme – rise of General Nivelle – the Calais Conference – the battle of Arras – the catastrophe to the French on the Aisne – Haig's advice sought and given – the battle of Messines – the fateful postponement of the summer attack – the battle in Flanders – criticism rife – the Italian disaster – the battle of Cambrai – the German counter-attack at Cambrai – dismissal of Sir William Robertson and appointment of Sir Henry Wilson as C.I.G.S. – Haig's misgivings as to future leadership.

IMMEDIATELY the battle of the Somme was over, the Allied Commanders-in-Chief met in Conference to settle the plan of operation for the ensuing year. It was resolved in broad outline to follow the plan which had gone so near to decisive success in 1916. Again there was to be a series of blows over a wide front, co-ordinated both in sequence and in strength, to wear down the weakening resistance of the enemy, and finally to deliver the *coup de grâce*. But political considerations now dominated strategy. Both in France and England there had again been a change of Government, and in both countries the new political leaders were anxious for some striking success to consolidate their position, and fearful of the effect on public opinion of a repetition of the heavy casualties of 1916. France was in no mood for a further wearing-out battle, if by some stroke of brilliant strategy an early end to the fighting could be obtained. The British Government, oppressed by the heavy casualty lists of the Somme, sought some method of achieving victory without heavy loss.

A subordinate French Commander, General Nivelle, who had to his credit a considerable local success in the closing stages of the Verdun fighting, came forward with a scheme which, he claimed, would satisfy both desires. It was a complete reversal of the scheme sponsored by Joffre and Haig. By one gigantic effort on the part of the French, the German line was to be pierced by assault, and a general advance on the whole Allied front was to confirm the success and drive the Germans back to their frontier.

Both French and British Governments, deaf to the warnings of their military advisers, lent ready ears to Nivelle's arguments. Nivelle was appointed to replace Joffre as Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies and himself to conduct the operation which he had designed. He immediately communicated his detailed proposals to the British Commander-in-Chief. Haig was more than sceptical. He did not believe that the German power of resistance had as yet been so weakened as to admit of their lines being pierced by an assault of the character which was contemplated. He doubted whether the French Army, weakened by its losses at Verdun, and already at the end of its resources in man-power, could carry out the gigantic task which was proposed for it. Nor did he believe that the Aisne area which Nivelle had selected for his attack, and with which Haig was thoroughly familiar, was a suitable terrain for an assault in mass. But, having made clear his view to the French

Commander and to his own Government, he did not feel justified in refusing to co-operate to the extent now demanded by the French Commander-in-Chief. While prepared to co-operate, he was not willing to meet in full the demands of the new French Commander-in-Chief, which included at one and the same time a great extension of the lines allotted to the British, and the relegation of all British troops not actually in the lines for the task of railway construction. There arose a sharp divergence of opinion between the two Commands and into the discussion the British Government suddenly intervened. At a conference at Calais, over which the new British Prime Minister, Mr. Lloyd George, presided, and in face of the expressed disapproval of all the British military advisers, the decision was arrived at to place the whole British Army under the direct control of the French Commander-in-Chief for the forthcoming operations.

It was a crisis in Haig's life. The course which the British Cabinet was now adopting was directly contrary to the advice which he had tendered. The Nivelle plan of operations with which he was now ordered to conform was, in his opinion, not only unsound in principle but impractical in operation. He knew that all responsible British officers and many of the French leaders fully concurred in his view. He had no doubt but that the decision of his own Government meant that their confidence in him, if not entirely gone, was gravely weakened. He

had to choose between asking to be relieved of his command as a final protest, or accepting the decision of the Government with all that it involved. On the face of it, everything pointed to the relinquishment of his command. Haig decided otherwise. His reasons were threefold. He knew that his own resignation would not cause the Cabinet to alter their decision. His deep sense of discipline impelled him to accept the decision of duly appointed authority. As a protest, therefore, his resignation would be useless, and, however unsound the Cabinet's decision might be in his view, he still could not dispute their constitutional right to take the step. But, most important of all, he was firmly convinced that whatever task might be imposed upon the British Army, and whatever difficulties it might have to meet, he himself was the man most competent to lead it and overcome its difficulties. The subordination of the British Army to the French was expressly limited to the forthcoming operation. He was convinced that this operation was doomed, even before it began, to end in failure, and that the British Army would then find themselves faced with a military crisis with which he and he alone could cope, and which even then he did not regard as hopeless. He signed the proceedings of the conference in token of acceptance, adding the prophetic proviso :

While I am fully determined to carry out the Calais agreement in spirit and letter, the British Army and its Commander-in-Chief will be regarded by General Nivelle

as allies and not as subordinates, except during the particular operation which he explained at the Calais Conference.

Two months were to elapse before the Nivelle plan, thus blessed by the British Cabinet, was to be put to the final test of battle. They were anxious months for Haig. Nivelle, secure in the position accorded to him, proved an overbearing taskmaster. The terms in which he addressed Haig were curt to the verge of discourtesy. In an unwonted outburst of resentment, Haig characterised one communication as "a letter no gentleman could have written, and one which certainly no Commander-in-Chief would receive without protest."

The Battle of Vimy

By the beginning of April, Nivelle's preparations had matured. A preparatory attack was to be delivered by the British on the 9th, to be followed by the great French offensive on the 14th. On the appointed day, Haig struck, using once more a large number of tanks, and employing a new system of a succession of short advances at short intervals. Complete success crowned the attack. Within an hour the whole front line under attack was overwhelmed ; by nightfall the last completed line of defence and the Vimy Ridge were in British hands.

On the evening of the 13th – the end of the allotted time – the German front had been rolled back for over four miles on a twenty-four-mile

front. "A most striking success," was Haig's unemotional but deeply gratified comment.

Delayed for two days by weather, the great French attack was launched on the Aisne on the 16th of April, but, though pressed for two days with the utmost gallantry and determination, it failed even to attain its first objective. It was a merciless disaster. The inroads made by the enormous casualty list on the weakened manpower of France in themselves rendered impossible any further attack by the French for the remainder of the year. But even more serious than the loss of men was the effect upon the morale of the French armies. Discontent threatened to grow into active mutiny. It was now questionable whether the French would be able even to resist a strong attack by their enemy.

All eyes turned to Haig and the British Army to retrieve the situation. The sharp contrast between the great success of the battle of Vimy and the failure on the Aisne had brought a kaleidoscopic change in Haig's prestige both in London and Paris. In February and March, distrusted and discredited, his advice incontinently rejected, and his requests disregarded, he now, in April, found himself applauded and appealed to for counsel alike by the British and French Cabinets. The British Prime Minister showered congratulations and good wishes on him, and required of him a memorandum for guidance as to the further operations. The French sought his advice as to their action. Haig commented caustically : "The

Prime Minister has forgotten the warnings we gave him. Now he is all smiles and he shudders to think what might have happened if we had failed like the French ; a few weeks ago he denied us everything ; now he appears to have but one thought – to give us every assistance he can.” The congratulations gave him little pleasure and no increase of confidence in the support which he might expect should things go wrong in the task before him – a task rendered immensely more difficult by the events of the last few weeks.

But his advice was clear-cut. There must be return to first principles of war. All history showed that before the decisive blow could be delivered the enemy’s powers of resistance must be worn down. The time was not yet ripe for a decisive blow. Nivelle had failed because he had miscalculated this factor. A return must be made to the methods of the Somme. The British Army could undertake the task required of it, and in due course he would attack.

Meantime grave disaffection had spread throughout the French Army, and General Pétain, who had succeeded General Nivelle in chief command, appealed to Haig to attack the Germans at once and so gain time for the French Army to recover its morale. To this appeal Haig gave a whole-hearted response. During the brief period of Nivelle’s command he had never lost sight of the possibility of just such an eventuality as had now occurred. His preparations were already well advanced. The battle of

Arras had made inroads on the available supplies of munitions and material. As soon as these were replaced, and the other necessary preparations completed, he would assume the offensive. Early in May he expounded his plan to his Army Commanders.

The first blow, to synchronise in time, if possible, with impending attacks by the Russians and Italians on their respective fronts, was to be in the early days of June, on the Messines Ridge, where his preparations were already completed, and was to be followed by the main British effort, north-west of Ypres, which was to be pressed forward with the ultimate objective of threatening the vital German railway communications and freeing the Channel ports. Even should the ultimate objective not be reached, the wearing down of the German resistance might well make possible a decisive blow at some other portion of the long-drawn line in the later months of the year.

Messines, 7th June, 1917

For the remainder of 1917 the fighting in France and Belgium resolved itself into a prolonged duel between the British and Germans. The Messines attack had been an integral part of the Joffre-Haig plan which had been incontinently stopped by the Calais Conference. Seeking, as ever, some new feature to gain surprise, Haig had pressed forward the construction of deep-laid mines under the enemy's position. More than four and a half miles of mine galleries

had been driven. At dawn on the 7th of June seventeen mines were simultaneously exploded, and under cover of a hurricane of artillery fire the British troops attacked on a front of nine miles. The battle, under the immediate control of Sir H. Plumer,¹ proceeded like clockwork. By the early afternoon all the objectives had been gained, large numbers of prisoners and guns captured, and counter-attacks heavily driven off. The operation stands as a complete and perfect example of successful military enterprise. The effect on the German Army was marked – “The 7th June,” says Ludendorff, “cost us dear . . . the drain on our resources was very heavy, it was many days before the front was again secure” – and in Germany itself its repercussions led Hindenburg to write to the Emperor at the end of June, “Our greatest anxiety now is the decline in the national spirit.”

It was no part of Haig's plan to press the Messines attack further, and he now turned his attention to the perfection of the preparations for the main attack in Flanders.

A brief visit to England during June had given him opportunity of meeting the Cabinet. He had found them, one and all, deeply pessimistic. The naval situation was serious, and there was grave news from Russia. The Prime Minister indeed urged that in France we should act only on the defensive until the end of the year. Haig would have none of it. Success had heartened him.

¹ Afterwards Lord Plumer.

To discontinue offensive action now would be playing the German game, and might bring disaster to the French. In spite of their success on the Aisne, the German power was weakening. If all available British forces were concentrated on the Western Front, great results might be obtained. In the end his view prevailed.

The confidence of the Cabinet in him was now fully restored, and its restoration was marked by the offer of a peerage, which Haig declined. He wished no honour, he said, until his task was accomplished. None the less the offer gave him keen pleasure.

Battles of Flanders, August–October, 1917

Assured now, anyhow for the moment, of full support at home, Haig returned to France to press forward the preparation of the main attack. Time was a vital factor. Careful examination of records of past years showed that in Flanders the fine summer weather broke in August with almost the regularity of an Indian monsoon. Haig hoped to be able to strike by the 25th of July, and still have at least a week or two of uninterrupted good weather for the first assaults.

But as the 25th of July drew nearer it became evident that the preparations for the assault could not be fully completed in time. The Army Commander to whom the attack was entrusted pleaded for a few days delay. The danger of delay was obvious. In modern warfare the

preparations for any attack cannot be wholly concealed. Immediately the enemy is aware of them, he begins to take steps to meet the threat. The attackers have a start, but not a long one. Even a day or two may make vital difference. And now, added to this, there was the additional risk of curtailment of the time available before the weather would break. But, on the other hand, to attack without full preparation carried with it dangers equally obvious and perhaps as great. For once Haig was a prey to doubts. His own judgment inclined definitely towards attacking on the appointed day even at the risk of preparations not fully completed. But, again, it was a fixed principle with him to meet in every way the wishes of an Army Commander who had to carry out a particular task. In the end he agreed to a postponement of three days. It was a decision with far-reaching results. Up to and on the 25th the weather remained clear and fine. Then it gave way, and on the 26th and 27th dense mist utterly prevented the final artillery registration. A further postponement of two days became necessary, and on the afternoon of the 31st, the day on which the assault was eventually delivered, the skies broke into heavy and continuous rain. The initial assault, if not indeed a failure, fell far short of that complete success to which the battles of Arras and Messines had now accustomed the British Army. It took several days continuous and very heavy fighting to drive forward the British line to their objectives which had been

assigned for the first day's assault. The incessant shell-fire had torn up and destroyed the intricate network of surface and subsoil drains of peacetime, and the flat plain was converted into a sea of mud. The British had indeed gained a foothold on the higher ground, but all reinforcements and supplies had to cross the morass.

For two more months there was a repetition of the Somme fighting, but with the additional difficulties of almost incessant rain and Flanders mud. In the middle of August, and again on the 20th of September, and finally early in October, Haig delivered attacks, each succeeding in gaining ground, none completely successful. But in one aspect the object of the battle was attained. German reinforcements were poured unstintingly into Flanders to resist the British effort, and had suffered very heavy loss. The French had been given time to reorganise, and by the end of October were again contemplating the assumption of the offensive. The morale of the Germans had noticeably fallen, the wearing-out was pursuing its course ; but, on the other hand, at this advanced time of the year there was no longer any hope of driving the Germans out of Flanders before winter.

Meantime in other theatres things were going badly for the Allies. In the Eastern theatre the Russians had collapsed, and in Italy an attack by the Austrians, with a stiffening of a few German units, had driven the Italians back in utter defeat. Consternation spread over Paris and

from which they had launched their assault. Yet when the fighting died down the final result of the battle was not unfavourable to the British. Some six miles of the German trench-line remained in their possession, including five miles of the formidable Hindenburg line.

Yet if it cannot be admitted as a defeat, equally it cannot be claimed as a victory. The losses on both sides had been about equal, and it was barren of strategic results.

But the indecisive results of Cambrai fighting and the fact that it ended with a set-back – for it was nothing more – in Haig's series of successes in the field, had unexpected consequences. The news of the first great initial success had been the signal for an unwonted ebullition of optimism by the Press and public at home. It was hailed in the Press as a great victory. Flags were flown and church bells pealed in universal jubilation. The news of the German counter-attack brought a corresponding reaction. Pessimism even more widespread and fully as unreasonable replaced optimism.

It had been a strenuous and trying year for Haig. In its early months he had seen his influence waning, his prestige at a discount, his Army made subordinate to the Commander-in-Chief of a foreign ally, and he himself forced to serve under an officer, both junior in rank and with far less experience, in the execution of a plan which he knew to be unsound. Then suddenly extolled to the skies, his advice,

previously incontinently rejected, was now sought alike by Allies and his own Government, and the whole burden of the active operations thrown upon him and the British Army. The period of confidence and trust had been short. Even before the operations in Flanders were launched, the Cabinet, again critical, were seeking to curtail his operations. Now the wheel had turned full circle. Dissatisfaction with his leadership was again rife. Greatly against his own wish, he had to make changes in his Staff. For a time it seemed as if his own position was insecure. Even before the Cambrai operations, the British Prime Minister, in public speeches, had openly disparaged the military leadership. The first successes at Cambrai had, for a few brief days, again raised him to a pinnacle of restored confidence, but the final course of the fighting left him, at the end of 1917, in no better position as regards his relations with the Cabinet than at the opening of the year.

On the other hand, the confidence of the Army, both officers and men, in his leadership had grown, and his own self-reliance and confidence in his own judgment in no way diminished. And his judgment, applied calmly and dispassionately to an appreciation of the situation at the end of the year, left him well satisfied. In Haig's opinion, there was incontrovertible proof that the morale of the German Armies had suffered under the vigorous attacks of 1917; there was already evidence, that could not be disregarded, that in

Germany itself the will of the people was weakening. The French Armies had recovered from the adverse effects of their failure on the Aisne. The morale of the British Armies was very high. Given adequate leadership and the proper utilisation of the available resources, both in men and material, the ultimate result was assured. For the moment the initiative lay with the Germans, but within a very short time it must again pass to the Allies, as the American Armies would reach France.

But on this vital point of adequate leadership and proper utilisation of resources, he was a prey to misgivings. The disaster to the Italians had had results far more untoward than those of a purely military nature. The Cabinets of Britain and France had seized the opportunity to assume a more direct and immediate control of military operations. Another conference, this time at Rapallo, had arrived at decisions almost as ill-advised as its predecessor at Calais. A Supreme War Council, with military representation entirely independent of both the Commanders-in-Chief in the field and the General Staff in London, had been formed and given the duty of reviewing the war plans of "the competent military authorities, to ensure their concordance and to submit any necessary changes"; and from that there had proceeded rapidly the formation of an Executive War Board, still independent of the Commanders-in-Chief, charged with the control of a General Reserve to be drawn from the French and British Armies

in France and Belgium. From such a cumbrous and unworkable organisation little could be hoped. But even worse was to follow. General Robertson, the Chief of the General Staff in London, who, since the death of Lord Kitchener, had been the principal military adviser of the Government, and in whom Haig had complete confidence, was summarily dismissed from his appointment and replaced by General Wilson, in whose strategic judgment Haig had profound disbelief, and who was, moreover, not likely to offer any effective opposition to any scheme, however unsound, that might be proposed by the Cabinet.

His forebodings were soon to be justified.

CHAPTER VIII

Haig's anticipation of probable German strategy – preparations for defence – the German assault – the battle of Amiens – Pétain's dangerous decision – Haig's request for a Generalissimo – Doullens Conference – appointment of Foch as Generalissimo – the battle of the Lys – the "Backs to the Wall" order – the end of German offensive against British – the Anniversary Service on 4th August, 1918.

FOR the whole of 1917 the initiative on the Western Front had lain with the Allies. They had attacked, and the Germans had perforce to content themselves with parrying their thrusts. Now the position was reversed. German divisions, freed by the collapse of Russia, were moving steadily and rapidly to France. It behoved the Allied Commanders to seek to divine their intentions. Some form of attack was certain, but it might be either an attack with every available unit or a series of lesser attacks with limited objective.

Haig had no doubt as to what was the correct strategy for the Germans. "An all-out attack by the Germans," he said, "must end in ultimate disaster to them"; and he was at first loath to believe that leaders as skilled as were the Germans would commit a fundamental error. Attacks on a large scale but with limited objective were probable; but, provided his Armies were maintained at their existing strength, he had no doubt as to their capacity to resist successfully and to await

unimpaired the moment when the initiative would again pass to the Allies.

In the early weeks of 1918 the indications both of the nature and direction of the German attack accumulated, and it became evident that the attack was to be directed at the point of junction of the French and British Armies, and that it was to be on a very large scale. Meantime the old discussion as to the extent of line to be held by French and British respectively recurred. The Supreme War Council, basing their view apparently upon a war game, and arriving at conclusions which subsequent events proved to be erroneous in every particular, overruled Haig's representations, and he found himself forced to take over from the French a large stretch of line at the precise point where he himself anticipated attack. Worse still, the Cabinet, in spite of his repeated and urgent appeals, did not send to him sufficient drafts to enable him to maintain his units at the 1917 strength, and he was compelled to reduce the strength of each of his divisions from thirteen battalions to ten battalions.

During the whole of January and February and the early weeks of March he was engaged in pushing forward his defence arrangements. On that portion of the line which during 1917 had been held by the British these were now completed and formidable, but the twenty-eight miles of extra line that he had taken over from the French presented a different picture, for in them there

had not been time to carry out all the necessary work.

In all other respects his preparations were completed. The Northern Armies had been reduced to a bare minimum and his strength concentrated within reach of the area which was now obviously about to be attacked in great strength. The general principle of his defensive strategy was to organise resistance in three defensive zones, situated at considerable distance from each other, the forward zone, which it was expected would come under very heavy artillery fire at the commencement of the battle, being only lightly held.

Only in one particular, but in one that proved of great importance, was Haig's forecast of the probable nature and extent of the German attack at fault. On the extreme right there was an extensive area of marshland which he anticipated would prove an effective military obstacle. An exceptionally dry spring had dried up the marsh sufficiently to allow the Germans to cross without difficulty.

In these anxious months, well aware of the severity of the ordeal that awaited him, and in spite of the disappointment of the disregard of his representations of the urgent need of more men, Haig remained confident and undisturbed. His conviction of divine assistance to a cause as just as that for which he and his Armies were fighting deepened and became personal to himself. As he came away from a sermon preached by his

chaplain on the text of Christ's prayer in Gethsemane : " Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine, be done," and the answer : " And there appeared an angel, strengthening him," he commented, " When things are difficult, there is no reason to be downhearted. We must do our best, and *for a certainty* a ministering angel will help."

German Attack, 1918 - Battle of Amiens

On the 21st of March, the long-expected attack by the Germans was delivered. For the first day the course of the fighting was generally what had been anticipated ; the front line, thinly held, had been overwhelmed. At nightfall the Armies were locked in battle in the second zone.

But on the second day the position worsened. Attacking with great determination and in dense strength, the Germans broke through the second zone, and all the British local reserves had been thrown into the battle ; but the extent and strength of the attack could now be gauged. There was no longer room for doubt in Haig's mind but that the Germans had committed the whole of their available force to this one effort, and that for the time being the rest of his line was secure from attack. A few more British divisions could be obtained by still further thinning the garrison holding the northern areas. By an arrangement made between Haig and Pétain, who was now Commander-in-Chief of the French

Armies, reinforcements of eight French divisions were ordered to the battle area, and, although they would not arrive for some days, the position, though grave, was not as yet in any sense critical. On the 23rd the gravity of the situation deepened. Early in the morning the Peronne bridge-head, on which reliance had been placed for prolonged resistance, was abandoned. By evening the enemy had forced the crossing of the Somme. A gap was developing between two of the British Armies which, if exploited by the enemy, might prove to be very serious. But prompt measures met the threat, and by the evening of the following day that danger was averted. So far Haig, calm, impassive, decisive, could still face the issue of the battle without undue anxiety. The German success showed no sign of becoming decisive. Their progress, if more rapid than had been anticipated, was already becoming markedly slower. A few more days would bring the promised French reinforcements which would fully restore the immediate situation. Then, without any warning, came the gravest crisis that the Allies had yet faced in the whole war. On the 24th, information reached Haig of orders issued by General Pétain, the French Commander-in-Chief, that, if the Germans continued to press forward, the French Armies were to withdraw south-west to cover Paris. It was a momentous decision. It brought for the first time into the range of possibilities complete disaster to the Allied cause. With the severance of the British and French

Armies thus contemplated, the Germans could turn first on one and then on the other and secure victory before the Armies of the United States of America could even reach Europe.

The crisis was fierce and menacing. Every day, every hour even, was invaluable. A visit to General Pétain confirmed Haig's fears. There was no hope of the decision being reversed by the French Commander-in-Chief. Nor could any reliance be placed upon the Supreme War Council. The machinery was too cumbrous to move quickly. Even if the Council came to the correct decision, it had no means of ensuring that its orders would be translated forthwith into action. The prime necessity was for the French Commander-in-Chief to be overruled and his orders reversed. Everything else must be subordinate to that. Once Haig's mind was made up his action was swift and decisive. He realised that his own independence of action must be thrown into the scales. The French were unlikely to accept the decision of anyone but a Frenchman. Haig believed there was one French General who could be relied on to act decisively and promptly, and to whom the French Government would be prepared to entrust the task. He returned from Pétain's with all speed to his own headquarters, and immediately despatched a telegram to London urging the War Minister and Chief of General Staff to come at once to France, with a view to the appointment of Foch as Generalissimo. That done, he proceeded to do all in

his own immediate power to prevent catastrophe. He made still further calls upon his Northern Armies, already thinned to a mere skeleton, for more divisions in substitution for the French reinforcements, on which he could now no longer rely. He noted with deep satisfaction how ready and loyal was the response. Divisions were at once set in motion towards the battlefield, but, even so, some days must elapse before they could arrive. Meantime, on the 25th and 26th, the Germans made renewed efforts to extend the advantage they had gained, but already they were reaching the limit of their efforts. By the night of the 26th the immediate crisis was over, and the fighting for the moment died down.

In London, action had been as prompt. Even before Haig's telegram arrived, the War Minister and the Chief of General Staff had been ordered to France to report on the situation. On the 26th they reached Haig's headquarters, and on the following day a Council of War met at Doullens, comprising both the President and Prime Minister of France, with their military advisers, and the two Commanders-in-Chief.

In moments of extreme crisis even Conferences can come to swift action. There was complete unanimity as to what was immediately required – the co-ordination of the action of the Allied Armies at the vital and threatened point of their junction. After a brief discussion, Clemenceau drafted a resolution appointing Foch “to co-ordinate operations of all Allied forces to ensure

that the French and British flanks remain united.” But Haig had no faith in half measures. Clemenceau’s proposal would in his opinion leave Foch, in effect, subordinate to both himself and Pétain. At once he intervened with the definite proposal that Foch should control the operations, not merely at the threatened area, but on the whole of the Western Front. Nothing else would suffice. The Germans, now committed to the offensive, were certain to renew their attack. The alternative to a supreme commander was now the Executive War Council, and Haig had no trust in its efficiency. His views were accepted, and Foch became Generalissimo of the Allied Armies.

But in actual fact the immediate crisis was over almost before the appointment was made. On the 28th the Germans renewed their attack, this time on the right against Arras, and were decisively repulsed. It was their last effort in this area. For a few more days fighting continued, but by the 4th of April German Headquarters had realised that this part of their great attempt to sever the Allied Armies had failed. “It was an established fact,” wrote Ludendorff, “that the enemy’s resistance was beyond our strength. . . . We had to take the extreme and difficult decision of abandoning the attack on Amiens for good.”

If it had failed, it had gone near to success. The losses to the British, both in men and guns, were enormous – a melancholy verification of the military maxim that attack is the best form of defence. The British Army had paid heavily for

the disregarding of Haig's advice both as to the extension of the British line and for the refusal to send to him the reinforcements which had been retained in England with a view to their employment elsewhere. But at the moment criticism centred on the military leadership, and especially the Commander of the 5th British Army, which had borne the brunt of the first attack and suffered most loss, and Haig was directed to remove him from his command. Not for a moment would Haig admit that the fault lay with the Army Commander. White with anger, he commented bitterly on those who sought to conceal their own errors of judgment and evade criticism by the sacrifice of subordinates. For a time he contemplated resignation as a final protest. But in the end a wiser view prevailed. His resignation would not save the Army Commander. The cause for which he was fighting was more important than the welfare of any individual. His own retention of the supreme command of the British forces was still essential to their success.

It is important to notice the essential difference between the new system of control of the Armies under a Generalissimo, introduced largely at Haig's own instigation, and that which had been evolved at the Calais Conference, against which Haig had energetically protested. By the Calais Conference, the British Armies and their Commander were placed directly under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies, who in turn owed direct allegiance to the French

Government. But now the Generalissimo, though a Frenchman, was not in immediate and direct command of the French Armies, and was responsible, not to the French Government, but in equal measure to the Governments of all the Allied countries. He was, in fact, virtually independent of civilian control as regards strategical leading.

The Germans, foiled in their first great attack, had not yet exhausted their efforts. The attack in the Amiens area had scarcely ceased before another and little less dangerous attack developed.

Battle of the Lys

The divisions despatched to the vital battle had left the British line in the Northern Armies dangerously thin. On the 9th of April, in the low-lying country of the Lys, the line was held by Portuguese divisions only recently arrived in France. The attack was pushed with a determination as great as at Amiens, and in two days a deep indentation had been made in the Allied line. Haig had only divisions already exhausted by severe fighting to send to meet the new danger, and although Foch, in response to his appeal for reinforcements, set in motion large French forces towards the new battle area, it was not until the 15th that the first French troops arrived and took over a portion of the British line, only to be at once attacked and driven out of the strong position at Kemmel. The situation was again very critical. The British Army, which for twenty-five days had resisted and brought to a standstill

the onslaught of the German Armies in vastly superior numbers, was utterly exhausted. The main portion of the French reinforcements was still some days distant. It was then that Haig penned his immortal appeal to his Armies for one more effort.

Returning from a long day's tour round his Armies, he had been met, as was his wont, by his orderly with his charger, and had indulged in an hour's cross-country gallop, the only relaxation which in those strenuous times he allowed himself. Then, arriving at his headquarters, he had gone straight to his room, and, alone at his table, had written the order which will live in history with Nelson's immortal order on the eve of Trafalgar.

TO ALL RANKS OF THE BRITISH FORCES IN FRANCE

Three weeks ago to-day the enemy began his terrific attacks against us on a fifty mile front. His objects are to separate us from the French, to take the Channel ports, and destroy the British Army.

In spite of throwing already a hundred and six divisions into the battle and enduring the most reckless sacrifice of human life, he has as yet made little progress towards his goals.

We owe this to the determined fighting and self-sacrifice of our troops. Words fail me to express the admiration which I feel for the splendid resistance offered by all ranks of our Army under the most trying circumstances.

Many amongst us are now tired. To those I would say that Victory will belong to the side which holds out the longest. The French Army is moving rapidly and in great force to our support.

There is no other course open to us but to fight it out. Every position must be held to the last man ; there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end. The safety of our Homes and the Freedom of Mankind alike depend upon the conduct of each one of us at this critical moment.

D. HAIG,
F.M.

Thursday, 11th April, 1918.

By the beginning of May the fighting in the Lys area had died down, and Haig was able to take stock of the situation. His Army was physically exhausted, but with its morale not only unimpaired but actually raised by their successful defence against these mighty German blows. Reinforcements, so vitally needed and withheld a few months before, were now flowing in from Britain. He had had to disband more than eight of his divisions. Five more were now with the French on the Aisne. He had still under his command forty-five divisions. These within a few weeks he would be able to reconstitute and refit. For the moment the initiative still rested with the Germans. He estimated their reserves replenished from Russia might still number as many as seventy-five divisions.¹ But the American Armies were now reaching France with ever-increasing rapidity. The balance would soon be redressed. From the various theatres, apart from Russia, the news was not unfavourable. There were signs that Bulgaria was restless and weary

¹ Actually they had only fifty divisions in reserve.

of war. In Mesopotamia the British were making headway. In Palestine the British had inflicted defeat on the Turks. The Italian front seemed steadfast. Most important of all, from Germany itself there came renewed reports of internal discontent and war weariness.

Meantime the Germans had transferred their efforts from the British to the French front, but there they had met with no greater success. The Allied line, bent and battered, still held, and by the end of June the British Army, rapidly absorbing drafts of men and replacements of the artillery lost in the spring battles, was steadily increasing both in numbers and in fighting efficiency. The number of divisions had again risen, and reached a total of fifty-two, and Haig felt himself strong enough to test the efficiency of his renovated Army in a series of small offensive operations. Already his mind was turning to the now inevitable moment when the Allies would be able to assume the offensive. On the 13th of July, two days before the last and final German effort was launched against the French, he issued definite orders for the preparation of the first of the great series of attacks which were in the next few months to give the final victory. He submitted his plan to Foch, who gave it his approval.

It is interesting at this point to note the working of the new system of command under the Generalissimo. The prime and immediate result had been that clear-cut and prompt decision had succeeded the vacillation and endless discussion

between civil and military authorities. For the first time the soldier's conception of war dominated the strategy. The process did not always carry with it the approval of the Civil Cabinets. When, in response to Foch's direction, Haig sent at first five divisions, and later four more to take their place for a time in the French line, the Cabinet, gravely alarmed, had sent one of their members to find out Haig's reason for compliance, and the Chief of General Staff in London had even gone the length of suggesting that Haig should definitely refuse. Eventually they threw all the responsibility upon Haig himself. If, in his opinion, any action of the Generalissimo was endangering the British Army, or in his opinion was not actuated by purely military considerations, Haig was enjoined to refuse compliance. Haig was not averse to accepting the responsibility, but he did so with the caustic comment, "If things go well, the Government get the credit; if badly, I shall be blamed." He had found relief in dealing with a soldier instead of a Cabinet. "I can deal with a man," he said, "not with a Committee."

On the 15th of July the last German attack was delivered against the French; it made little progress, and two days later Foch struck back in a strong counter-attack. It was the turning-point in the long struggle of the year's fighting. All the German troops had now been used up. They were at the end of their available manpower. Perforce they had to revert to the

defensive and now await the Allies' blows, and Haig was rapidly completing his preparation for attack. At the beginning of the year he had stated his opinion that if the Germans embarked on a general offensive, it must end in disaster to them. Now, only seven months later, he was about to prove the truth of his prediction.

The fourth anniversary of the war fell during the final preparations. He directed that a special Thanksgiving Service should be held at his headquarters, to give thanks to God for the guidance of Providence that had brought the Empire and the Army through the trials of the years that had passed, and to beseech that it be not withdrawn until victory crowned their efforts. It was a very real thanksgiving and prayer from the British Commander-in-Chief. "Only by trusting in Christ," he commented about this time, "can we have confidence in grave responsibilities." The suggestion was made that a bishop from home should conduct the service. Haig would have none of it. "No one," he said, "but a chaplain who has seen service with the troops in the front line can interpret the feelings of the Army at such a time as this." Himself a Presbyterian, he wished all ministers of religion to take their part in the service. "You can draw lots," he said, "as to the order in which they come."

To the troops he issued a general order, thanking them for their "devoted bravery and unshaken resolution" in the dark days that were now over. "I know," he wrote, "that they will

show a like steadfastness and courage in whatever tasks they may yet be called upon to perform."

It was in the stupendous crisis of the events of the first half of 1918, even more than the subsequent great and victorious battle, that Haig reached his full stature. Although his trained judgment had told him from the beginning that the strategy actually followed by the enemy was that which must lead to disaster, he had seen the scales weighed down in favour of the Germans by successive errors beyond his control. His own line had been lengthened, the effective strength of his Army weakened, and reinforcements available in England withheld from him. The first fierce assaults of the enemy had met with a greater measure of success than he had anticipated ; then the abandonment by his Allies of the pre-arranged plan for joint action had brought complete catastrophe into the range of possibilities ; and, finally, a further blow by the Germans on his attenuated line had strained the resisting powers of his Army to the very verge of breaking. He had met each successive crisis with prompt and correct decision. He had not hesitated to throw into the balance his own position and the independence of his Army leadership. His calm fortitude had risen to the strain. He had never for a moment lost either the control or the confidence of his men. His mind had moved with mechanical accuracy in the midst of the turmoil. His unflustered manner and quick, incisive decisions had inspired trust. When reports, often

exaggerated, of either local mishap or success reached him, he could calm any tendency to excitement among those around him with the even words, "Don't fuss ; nothing is either so good or so bad as it is first reported to be."

Only an occasional extra vicious tug at his moustache or a slight deepening in the Doric of his speech betrayed to those who knew him best that even he was not entirely unaffected by the strain.

No one can now analyse whence he derived the strength that sustained him. The General Order to his Army in the hour of direst need indicates the motives that he believed would inspire others to further effort – the spirit of self-sacrifice, the belief in the justice of their common cause, the virtue of endurance. But for himself there was a deeper source of strength – the confident conviction that both he and "All Ranks" were the chosen instruments of Providence for a divine purpose. Many might fall by the wayside, but the purpose would be accomplished and the appointed end reached.

CHAPTER IX

Haig's conception of scope of Allied attacks – the second battle of Amiens – conflicting views of Haig and Foch – Haig's plan accepted – battles of Bapaume and Arras – the Hindenburg line described – timorous Councils in London – Haig's tactical plan – the piercing of the Hindenburg line – battles of Lille and Courtrai – German Army beaten to its knees – vindication of Haig's judgment.

ALONE among the leaders on either side Haig now foresaw the possibility of a victorious end to the war before 1918 should have run its course. In London, Sir Henry Wilson, the Chief of Imperial General Staff, was advising the Government that it would be "unwise to attempt to gain a final victory before 1920." The Generalissimo himself was designing local operations for the autumn to free the railway lines that had been taken by the Germans in their advance, and Ludendorff records that "by the beginning of August we had reverted to the defensive on the whole front. . . . I considered the enemy might continue his attacks . . . but I further considered the operations would only take the form of isolated local attacks." But it was no isolated local attack that Haig had in mind when, in July, he outlined to his Army Commanders and Staff the series of battering operations he was designing for his Armies. The fingers of the British Commander-in-Chief had traced on the great map on which he was explaining his plan, a succession of objectives far beyond

the railway zone, deep into and finally through the entrenched German fortress line. A succession of blows were to fall on the Germans. They were to be given no time to recover. As Haig saw the situation, the "wearing-out phase" of the great struggle was now over. The British Army, once more at battle strength, with vast numbers of tanks available, with unlimited supplies of ammunition, by now supreme in the air, was in a state to deliver the decisive blow for which the situation was now ripe. There was to be no 1919 campaign.

Haig was no longer in independent command, but Foch, though frankly incredulous of Haig's anticipation being realised, agreed to the initial stages of the scheme, and even placed at Haig's disposal a French force to act under his orders and assist him in his operations.

The Second Battle of Amiens, 8th-12th August

At early dawn on the 8th of August, under cover of an overwhelming cataract of shells, the British assaulted on a front of eleven miles due eastward of Amiens. Still further to their right the French extended the blow for another five miles. The operation was a complete success. The depth of the advance, the 22,000 prisoners and 400 guns that remained in British hands were the tangible result, but the intangible results were far more important. The impression made on the weakening will of the Germans, both men and

leaders, was decisive. To quote Ludendorff again : " The 8th August put the decline of the fighting powers [of the Germans] beyond all doubt. . . . The war must be ended " ; and Haig now permitted himself to write to the War Office that " we must now hit as hard as we can, to get peace this autumn." But it would seem as if Ludendorff and Haig, even now, alone realised the full significance of the situation. A month was to elapse before the development of the drama brought conviction to Foch's mind, even longer before the Government at home concurred in Haig's view.

The first advance had brought the British attack clean through the first zone of German entrenchment. By the 11th of August they were face to face with the formidable second line. Then occurred a sharp conflict of opinion between Foch and Haig. The Generalissimo urged immediate and direct attack on the second line. Haig's plan was different. He wished now to bring his Army and the others into the operation, and peremptorily declined to commit his troops for the effort desired by Foch, which, in his view, would be unnecessarily costly in men and less effective than his own blow. A personal interview between the two leaders failed to bring agreement. Faced with a will as determined as his own, and in view of the fact that the alternative plans were in any case to be carried out by British troops, Foch gave way. The subsequent operations of the British Armies were in consequence solely as

designed by Haig, and to him alone belongs the credit both for their inception and their execution.

Battle of Bapaume, 20th-31st August. Battle of Arras, 28th August-3rd September

On the 20th of August, the Army immediately on the north wing of the battlefield of 8th August was thrown into the struggle in the Albert-Bapaume area, followed, four days later, by the Army still further to the north in the Arras area. By the early days of September, as the result of four weeks' fierce effort, the British had driven the Germans back through all the blood-soaked area of the Somme battle; and stood against the great fortified Hindenburg line protecting the vital railway communications by which alone the German Armies in northern France could receive their supplies.

The defensive system now known as the *Hindenburg line* was in actual fact not a line at all, but a vast defensive zone fortified by a very skilfully designed series of successive entrenched lines. The construction had been commenced by the Germans in the early days of 1916, with the double purpose of meeting the threat of an Allied attempt on the Somme area, and of permitting the Germans, if circumstances so demanded, to contract the extent of their front by a voluntary withdrawal to its protection, and thus set free troops for service elsewhere.

It had been enlarged, and extended and perfected during the succeeding years, and now

presented infinitely the most formidable defensive system in the whole area of the war. Held by an Army of unimpaired morale, it would have been well-nigh impregnable. To attack it, even when held by an Army staggering under the results of a series of defeats as were the Germans, was an enterprise before which the boldest might well hesitate. There was no doubt but that the German resistance was crumbling, but to what extent was necessarily a matter of divergent opinion. Foch, quick to appreciate the possibilities of the situation, now directed a general attack on the whole Allied front ; the Americans, after reducing the St. Mihiel salient, were to press forward due north towards the coal-fields of Brecy, the French to attack in Champagne, the British to continue their attack in the St. Quentin-Cambrai area and to act with the Belgians also, in Flanders. But in the main he still adhered to his plan to free the railway zones. But Haig had other views. Towards the end of August he had urged that the general attack should be concentric, not eccentric, the Americans and French should direct their efforts towards Mezières, while he himself, with the British, would attack the Hindenburg line. Once more the Generalissimo accepted his view.

The responsibility which Haig thus assumed was enormous.

The Chief of Imperial General Staff in London, on the very eve of the attack, warned him that the Cabinet " would become anxious if we received heavy punishment in attacking the Hindenburg

line without success." The War Minister openly expressed the view that Haig was ridiculously optimistic, and warned him of the risk of "knocking his present Army about," and added that his own military adviser "now considered the decisive moment of the war would be July 1919." Foch himself made no secret of his doubts. He would not definitely order the attack. He left the responsibility to Haig. Haig had no doubts and no hesitation. He was well aware that if the attack failed he would be removed from his command. He commented forcibly upon the vacillation at home. "What a lot of weaklings we have in London at the present time, and how ignorant they are of the first principles of war."

But if support from the quarter whence he might most justly expect it was lacking, he knew his troops would not fail him. In a General Order he reminded them that during the short space of one month they had "repeatedly defeated the German Armies"; and added, "We have passed many dark days together. Please God, they will never return. The enemy has now spent his effort, and I rely confidently upon each one of you to turn to full advantage the opportunity which your skill, courage, and resolution has created."

His tactical plan for the great effort was simple – an attack on his left to distract the enemy's attention from the main effort which was to be delivered a little later by his right Army. But if the plan was simple, the difficulties that the troops

had to overcome were very formidable. On their left there was the great Canal du Nord, generally too deep to ford, its bridges destroyed, and impassable for tanks. On their right the closely woven network of entrenchments.

On the 27th of September the left advanced to the assault. Equipped with the lifebelts of the Channel steamers, carrying light rifles and in the face of machine-gun and rifle fire, the infantry slid down the bank, splashed their way through the water, and, having clambered up the other bank, by nightfall were firmly established across the obstacle. Light bridges were hastily thrown across, and another day's hard fighting had made ready the situation for the main attack on the 29th of September. Again complete success crowned the effort. By the night of September 30th the Hindenburg line was broken. Thirty-two British divisions, with two American divisions, had driven thirty-nine German divisions from the strongest fortified line known to warfare – a very memorable victory. Meantime in other areas, under the plan of the Generalissimo, other blows were being struck at the crumbling German line.

Away to the north, in Flanders, another British Army, acting with the Belgian Army, had driven forward the Allied line, regaining all the ground lost in the spring, and passing the farthest limits reached in 1917. And in the south, the French and American Armies were gaining victories.

Lille, 8th October ; Courtrai, 14th October

Once more Haig struck, with the whole weight of his Armies. By the middle of October the Germans had been driven out of the last section of the Hindenburg line, back to and across the River Selle, while on the left the British Army, operating with the Belgians, had forced their way forward to the Scheldt. The great industrial area of Flanders and northern France was freed from the German hold, and at last the whole Belgian coast was in Allied hands. It remained only to reap the final fruits of victory of the great series of battles. On the 1st of November, Haig delivered his last and decisive blow. But by now it was a pursuit more than a battle against an organised Army. Here and there part of the German line still offered stubborn resistance, but in ten days Haig drove the Armies forward and seized the vital lateral railway communications. The German Army stood divided into two portions by the great natural obstacle of the Ardennes. The manœuvre which Ludendorff had attempted against the Allies in the spring had been accomplished by Haig against the Germans in the autumn.

The German Armies, beaten to their knees and utterly demoralised, had no alternative but to seek what terms they could get from their victors.

The repercussion of the early success in August and September had brought the Bulgarians in the far-distant Balkans to sue for an armistice. By

the beginning of October the German Government, urged by their military leaders, had opened negotiations with America ; now, after this final blow, it was no longer a matter of negotiating but of suing for peace.

The responsibility which Haig had taken upon himself in this attack on the Hindenburg line, in the face of the doubts openly expressed both by his own Cabinet and by the Generalissimo, had been as great as that of any British soldier in history. He had not faltered. Alone among the great Allied leaders he had divined the probability of bringing the war to a successful end within the year. Weighing every consideration, he had foretold, before ever the German attack of the spring developed, with the accuracy bred of deep knowledge and that considered judgment which was the lodestar of his mind, the results that would ensue should Germany commit her forces to a limitless attack.

His judgment had been vindicated by the only court whose verdict he ever accepted – the verdict of events ; and it was a vindication such as is seldom afforded to any commander. Yet he claimed no credit for himself. He was but the instrument of the Divine guidance in which he so firmly believed. But for his Armies, for those of “ All Ranks ” to whom he was already determined to devote his life in the after-war years, he made great claims.

“ In these months of epic fighting, the British Armies in France have brought to a sudden and

dramatic end the great wearing-out fight of the past four years. . . . Our troops have beaten the enemy's resistance beyond possibility of recovery. . . . The strongest and most vital points of the enemy's front were attacked by the British, the lateral communications cut and the best division fought to a standstill. . . . The record is a proof of the overwhelmingly decisive part played by the British Armies on the Western Front in bringing the enemy to his final defeat. . . . It would be impossible to devise a more eloquent testimony to the unequalled spirit and determination of the British soldiers of all ranks and services."

CHAPTER X

The Armistice – honours and rewards – resolve to devote his life to ex-Service men – Mansion House meeting – formation of the British Legion and British Service League – at Bemersyde – Haig's death and burial.

ON the 11th November, 1918, the Armistice was signed, the bugles sounded the Cease Fire, the Great War was over. For a few months longer, during the long-drawn peace negotiations, Haig remained abroad in command of the Army, already rapidly demobilising. In July 1919 he returned to England, to take up, for a short time, the duties of Commander-in-Chief of the Army in Britain, and, in his office at the Horse Guards, sat at the table which a century before had been used by the Duke of Wellington. Honours fell thickly upon him. The Sovereign conferred upon him the Order of Merit, the highest award in his gift; Parliament voted him a grant of £100,000. The Powers that had been allied to Britain in the war gave him their highest Orders. He was created Earl Haig, Viscount Dawick, and Baron Haig of Bemersyde. His fellow-countrymen, by public subscription, purchased and presented to him the property of Bemersyde, the ancestral home of the Haigs.

The hour of his triumph afforded him opportunity for an act of characteristic thoughtfulness. Lord Haldane, to whom the Army owed so much in pre-war years, was then under a cloud of

popular disfavour. On the day when all London was assembled to do honour to Haig and his Army Commanders – marching in procession through the capital to be received by the Monarch – Haig found time to go to Lord Haldane's house and leave with him a copy of the war despatches inscribed : “ To Viscount Haldane of Cloan, the greatest Secretary for War England has ever had. In grateful remembrance of his successful efforts in organising our military forces for a war on the Continent, notwithstanding much opposition from his Army Council and the half-hearted support of his Parliamentary friends. – Haig, F.M.”

Still in the prime of life, in perfect mental and physical health, he could have aspired to further high office in the service of his country. His Army Commanders were within a short time ruling Palestine, Egypt, and Canada. He chose another outlet for his energies. Far back in the days of the bitter struggle on the Somme, he had told a member of his Staff that when the war was over he would devote what remained to him of life to the service of the men and officers who under him were serving and suffering for their country. Now the resolve was strengthened by the hardships which he saw his demobilised men forced to endure. He set himself resolutely to the new task. Called as a witness before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on Pensions, he had condemned as “ inhuman and scandalous” the treatment first proposed, and had

refused to accept any honours for himself until he had satisfied himself that the officers and men who had served under him were receiving proper and adequate treatment. Even when satisfied with the provision finally made by the State, he realised that much remained to be done to make life tolerable for the disabled, and to get the hale re-absorbed into the life and work of the country at peace.

He saw the danger to the community of hundreds of thousands of ex-Service men, now swelling the ranks of the unemployed, falling under wrong leadership. Even more, he realised how ineffective would be the efforts of the numerous small disconnected associations of ex-Service men, already springing up throughout the country, to render real assistance to those requiring help, and what a powerful instrument for good they would be if amalgamated in unity and comradeship under proper leadership. His first step was to bring about co-operation among the ex-officers. From a meeting at the Mansion House under the chairmanship of the Lord Mayor, who willingly lent his assistance, there came into being the Officers' Association, the nucleus of further developments.

The numerous men's organisations were next taken in hand, and there arose the British Legion, amalgamating all the important men's societies under his leadership.

He had laid down essential principles that should govern the new organisation. Mutual help was to be the keynote. There must be no

connection of any sort with party politics ; patriotism and comradeship were to inspire them in peace as in the days of the war.

The provision of funds for the work was essential. The ex-Service men themselves, however willing, could not make large contributions. The profits accumulated by the Service canteens during the war had been formed into a United Service Fund while Haig was still serving. Lord Byng had been the first chairman, now Haig himself took the post, and was able to co-ordinate the work of the Fund with that of the Legion. But in 1921 he made still better provision by the institution of "Poppy Day," when the public were asked, on the anniversary of the Armistice, to purchase poppies, the proceeds of the sale to go to a fund devoted to ex-Service men. In its first year, it brought in over £100,000, and year by year the amount increased. The manufacture of artificial poppies for the annual sale has become a fruitful source of employment for disabled ex-Service men.

As the British Legion developed and grew in England, Haig turned his attention to the Overseas Dominions, where the ex-Service men were faced with similar difficulties. He visited South Africa and Canada, and set the seal upon his labours for the ex-Service men by founding the British Empire Service League, which he described as a "mighty federation to bind together all who served in the forces of the Empire during the Great War."

It may well be that in the British Service League and British Legion, Haig has rendered his country a service little less valuable than his leadership of her troops in war. The vast organisation bears enduringly the impress of his character, and embodies his ideals: Unity, Comradeship, and Peace; Loyalty to King and Country; the Development of the British Commonwealth; above all, in his own words, "to further and maintain the spirit of self-sacrifice which in the war inspired all ranks to subordinate their individual welfare to the interests of the common weal, and to perpetuate a spirit of comradeship and patriotism throughout the Empire."

With the exception of his work for the ex-Service men, Haig had withdrawn almost entirely from public life when he relinquished his appointment at the Horse Guards. He spent most of his time at Bemersyde, entering into the social life of the neighbourhood, hunting with the local pack of hounds, playing golf, and becoming deeply interested in the planning and development of his small estate. There were certain public engagements to fulfil, for all the great cities were eager to inscribe his name upon their roll of freemen, and he rarely refused a request to unveil a War Memorial. It was his own personal tribute to the fallen. He had largely overcome both his dislike to and his lack of proficiency in making speeches. Always he struck the same note of duty, self-sacrifice, and service.

His study, at the top of the century-old Tower of Bemersyde, and reached by a spiral stone staircase round a central pillar, with a rope hanging vertically to serve as assistance in the ascent, was a museum of war memories. A flag, taken from the Mahdi in his first campaign in the Soudan, decorated one wall ; on another was the great map which he had used in France. At a writing-table, rigidly neat and tidy, he answered, day by day, in his own handwriting, the numerous appeals that came to him from ex-Service men. To a remonstrance that he should employ a secretary and spare himself, he replied, " No. A letter from me, in my own handwriting, means much to these poor fellows. It may help them in their struggle."

It was the same characteristic that made him reply to a stranger who said to him, " I seem to know your face, sir," with the words, " Possibly ; I served in the war ; my name is Haig."

There was a constant stream of visitors to Bemersyde, for he delighted to see those who had served with him, and to those who came it seemed as if the years had dealt very leniently with him. Physically he was still active, climbing the steep narrow stairs to his study with the agility of a young man, but those who knew him best noticed a change. His mind now no longer stretched forward into the future, but turned almost invariably to the past. Formerly so alert and vigorous in his conversation, now he would sit and brood at times, communing with himself.

His greatest pleasure was found in recalling incidents of the war. His retentive memory rarely failed him even about small events. He was invariably able to mention some occasion on which the unit of any ex-Service man whom he might meet, had distinguished itself.

The end came with unexpected suddenness. On the 27th of January, 1928, he journeyed to London, and on the following day he was present at the enrolment ceremony of Boy Scouts in a new unit called after himself and recruited from the sons of disabled ex-Service men. It was fitting that his last words in public should be addressed to the sons of such sires. It was a speech in simple words. He urged the lads "always to play the game, to try to realise what citizenship and public spirit really meant, to remember always that you belong to a great Empire, and, when people speak disrespectfully of England, stand up and defend your country."

On Sunday, the 30th of January, he seemed in his usual health. He was staying with his sister, the sister who had first directed his path into the Army. He was actively engaged all day. At 10 p.m. he said good night and went to his bedroom. A few minutes later, his brother, also a visitor at his sister's house, heard the sound of low moans coming from his room and hastening there, found Haig sitting on his bed, fully conscious but gasping for breath. A few minutes passed, and, before a doctor could be summoned, he was dead.

He had chosen his own burial-place in the precincts of Dryburgh Abbey, on the banks of the Tweed, almost within sight of his home at Bemersyde where already reposed the remains of his great fellow-countryman, Sir Walter Scott.

There, on a bleak winter's day, the sun scarce piercing the grey, wind-driven clouds, with the Tweed in brown spate almost lapping the Abbey walls, his body was laid to rest.

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